

**THE
ATOM
CHASERS**

ANGUS MacVICAR has also written

SECRET OF THE LOST PLANET
RETURN TO THE LOST PLANET
THE LOST PLANET
MINNY SMITH COMES HOME
TIGER MOUNTAIN
THE GREY PILOT
STUBBY SEES IT THROUGH
KING ABBIE'S ADVENTURE
FARAWAY ISLAND
THE BLACK WHERRY
THE CROCODILE MEN

ANGUS MACVICAR

THE ATOM
CHASERS



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CHAPTER I

Encounter with the Law

IT WAS an odd kind of place to find on the high moor. Concealed from the village in the strath by a ridge of hills on the one side and a towering rough-edged cliff on the other, it looked harsh and raw and new among the rolling acres of peat and faded heather.

To Sandy, as he crouched with Jock and Willie among a pile of boulders, it resembled a constructional toy set up in a garden. The rectangle of low, prefabricated huts, the tar-macadamed courtyard shining in the wintry sun, the spidery steel girders surrounding the base of the tall tower—they gave him a pleasurable feeling of interest and excitement.

And no wonder. The place was a secret atom station, and he and his companions had no right to be so close to the gleaming barbed-wire fence which surrounded it.

Until now the silence of the moor had been disturbed occasionally only by the call of a peewit or snipe; but suddenly, as they waited, the cool, bog-scented air began to vibrate with a persistent drone.

Jock poked his head higher over the top of the sheltering boulder. 'Sounds dangerous. What d'you think it is, Sandy?'

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'I'm not sure. Maybe a dynamo.'

Willie shivered. He was younger than the others and small for his years. 'Could it be the atoms all boiling up?' he inquired, anxiously.

'Be your age!' growled Jock. 'Atoms don't boil.'

'They get split,' explained Sandy, with the patience required of a superior intelligence. 'Inside that big tower. It's what you call a reactor. And in any case, the sound isn't coming from there.'

Willie sighed. He was vaguely frightened. But when Sandy and Jock decided to inspect the station even more closely, he raised no objection and crawled behind them through the damp heather until they came to within a few feet of the fence. The droning sound grew stronger and more sinister.

'Don't touch the barbed-wire,' warned Sandy. 'It may be electrified.'

'Wh-what d'you mean by "electrified"?' whispered Willie, uneasy again.

Sandy looked at him with pity. 'Jock,' he said, 'explain to him. In words of one syllable if possible!'

'Okay! "Electrified" means there's a current of electricity passing through the fence—and if you touch it you get a shock. A colossal shock, p'rhaps, that'll send you flying!'

Willie blinked.

'No need to panic,' Sandy reassured him. 'You'll be safe as long as you don't touch it. Anyway we don't really *know* that it's electrified.'

After a time, during which they took care to avoid being seen by the white-overalled scientists moving between the huts inside, Sandy and Jock reached

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the conclusion that the sound emanated from a small shed behind the reactor.

'I expect it's just a dynamo, as I thought,' said Sandy. 'They'll need a pretty hefty one to supply a place as big as this with light and power.'

Jock nodded. 'Why on earth did they choose Dunglass for an atomic station?'

'Well, it's a lonely kind of parish—tucked away here on the Mull of Kintyre.' Sandy spoke with an air of knowledge and experience. 'They'd probably want to keep it as secret as possible. Besides, they weren't wanting any good land—just all this heather and rock. Dad said it was a good thing. Gave a lot of work to the crofters and fishermen and people like that. And he himself preaches to a bigger congregation in Church than ever he did.'

'My father sells them milk and butter,' chipped in Willie. 'He comes up here with a van every day.'

'We know!' replied Jock. 'And he's bought a new TV set out of the profits!'

'Well, he and Mum have worked hard for it—looking after thirty cows——'

Sandy interrupted with firm authority. 'You're talking too much! Better keep quiet in case anyone hears you!'

And as Willie meekly subsided he went on: 'You know Major Morrison, Jock—the laird? He was at the Manse a few nights ago, and he's hopping mad because the station was built here. Says it's because it may blow up at any minute, and then Dunglass being such a small place not so many people will get killed!'

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'Gosh, what rot!'

'Oh, you know the Major. "Gad, sir—what's the world coming to! The younger generation is heading for a fall. Heading for a fall, sir! Wuff, wuff, wuff".' Jock laughed, and Sandy, encouraged, heaped additional scorn on old-fashioned prejudice. 'Anybody who's ever learned Science knows perfectly well that atomic reactors don't blow up! Unless,' he added, grimly, 'someone puts a bomb in them.'

Willie looked up from behind a tuft of heather. 'Wouldn't it be terrible if the whole place blew up—now—right on top of us!'

'Oh, be quiet!' said Sandy. 'If you're scared, why d'you trail around after Jock and me everywhere we go?'

Willie protested that he wasn't really scared. 'But it looks such an eerie place, with scarcely anybody about—though there must be hundreds of people inside.'

A few minutes later the droning died away. In one respect it was disappointing—in another a great relief. Sandy became a trifle bored.

'Jock,' he said, finally, 'I bet you're scared to touch the fence—even with a root of heather.'

'You mean because it may be electrified?'

'Yes.'

'How much d'you bet?'

'A bar of chocolate.'

'Have you got a bar of chocolate?'

'No, but I have fourpence to buy one.'

Jock grinned. 'Okay. I bet you a bar of chocolate I'm *not* scared.'

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'Here you are, then.' Sandy pulled up a gnarled twig of heather and handed it over.

'Oh, Jock,' breathed Willie, 'take care! What if you're killed!'

'All right—you try it and save my life!'

'No fears!'

'Go on, Jock!' exclaimed Sandy. 'You're putting off time. I bet you're scared.'

Jock laughed. It was a hollow laugh which barely concealed his nervousness. But he was committed now, and action was required. He took a long breath. Next instant he thrust the heather forward, with the speed of an adder's tongue. The fence twanged as he struck.

For the space of an eye-blink he paused to make sure that he still lived. Then in mingled relief and triumph he blurted out: 'There! What about that bar of chocolate——'

A sharp sound came from behind them—the scrape of a heavy boot on a stone. Like startled eels the three boys twisted round. There, confronting them, was a stout, red-faced policeman, whose walrus moustache and heavy frown were full of menace.

Sandy scrambled to his feet. As their acknowledged leader it was his duty to do his best for Jock and Willie. He smiled in what he imagined was a frank and charming way.

'Hullo, Scargeant Grant. We never expected to see *you* here!'

The other's frown remained fixed. 'There's no need to be putting the butter on, Sandy Campbell.

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I'm a plain constable—no sergeant about it, as you know quite well.'

'Sorry, Constable. But I thought——'

'It's not what *you're* thinking. It's what *I'm* thinking.' The deliberate Highland accent made the afternoon seem chilly and bleak. 'What are you doing, loitering about here at the atomic station, when you know it's a forbidden area?'

Willie squeaked out: 'I never meant to come. Honour bright. But it's a Saturday, and there wasn't much else to do——'

'Dry up!' growled Jock.

There was a silence. Inside the station someone hammered on a piece of metal. The boys fidgeted.

'Now then, I'm waiting for an answer.' Constable Grant smoothed his moustache. 'I may say I've been watching you for some time, crawling about on your tummies like Red Indians and acting in a highly suspicious manner! Come away—speak up!'

Sandy took^a a deep breath. 'We came,' he said, 'because we'd never been close to the station before, and—well, it's kind of exciting, isn't it, away up here in the hills? Everything so quiet, and all that power in there behind the fence.'

'H'm. It's poetry you'll be writing next.' Constable Grant was keenly sarcastic. 'You're pleading simple curiosity, is that it?'

'That's it,' agreed Sandy.

'You know that curiosity killed the cat?'

'Yes, but we didn't mean any harm—honestly! We were crawling about just to make it seem more—more sort of thrilling.'

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'I see.' The stern voice softened a little. 'But I'll tell you this—if I find you near this fence again there will be ructions! In the meantime, I'll take a note of your names and addresses.'

As he pulled out his notebook, Sandy grinned. 'But you know our names quite well,' he said.

'Being on official duty I'll have to be doing things in an official manner!' replied Constable Grant. 'I've just had a conference in there with Sir Wilfred Steele himself, the Director of the station. The subject was security.'

'Gosh! You don't think we're spies, do you?'

'That's as may be.' He licked his pencil. 'Now then—we'll start with the wee fellow. Your name please?'

'W-W-Willie Niven.'

'H'm. Age?'

'E-eleven. I'll be twelve the day after Christmas.'

• 'And your father is Archibald Niven, in the farm of Strone?'

'Yes. You—you won't tell him about this, will you? I mean, if they were to stop buying his milk and butter because of me——'

'I'll not be telling him just at the moment. And maybe I won't be telling him at all if your conduct is satisfactory. Next, please.'

'Jock Galbraith. Age thirteen.'

'Mphm. Address?'

'Gosh, I'm sure we live next door to you in the village!'

'Well, well, what if you do! Son of Mr. Edward Galbraith, Postmaster, Dunglass, Kintyre. Mphm.'

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A terrible thing it would be if the son of a postmaster—who is an elder of the Kirk forbye—became involved in a breach of internal security! Now then, boy, it's your turn.'

'My name's Sandy Campbell. I'm thirteen, too.'

'Thirteen—yes. Address?'

'The Manse, Dunglass. My father is the Rev. Walter Campbell, minister of the parish.'

'H'm, you're good at talking! Quite a gift of the gab, indeed! Very well, that's the lot.' He put the notebook back in the breast-pocket of his uniform and added: 'I would be advising you all to be pretty careful in future. Sir Wilfred was just telling me that security is being tightened up.'

At that moment Sandy noticed a bareheaded man coming towards them from the direction of the high cliff. 'I say—who's this?' he exclaimed, glad of the diversion.

The stranger was of medium height and had a black pointed beard. He wore a pair of uncreased brown corduroys and a grey windcheater, and over his shoulders he carried a rucksack and a camera. He moved quickly, jumping from tussock to tussock with agility.

Constable Grant swung round, head thrust forward like a game dog's. Then he relaxed. 'Och, I know him well. It's Mr. Ingersoll—the bird-watcher.'

'A queer-looking character,' observed Jock.

And Willie squeaked out: 'Maybe *he's* a spy!'

'Don't be silly!' said Constable Grant. 'He came to see me the very first day he arrived in the village.'

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Last Wednesday it was. A nice man—and he knows Sir Wilfred.'

Mr. Ingersoll greeted them with a smile which showed all his white teeth. He put an arm about the policeman's broad shoulders. 'I spotted you through my binoculars and came to ask your advice.'

'No luck today yet?'

'None, I'm afraid, though I've been out on the moor since after breakfast.' He turned to the boys. 'I'm particularly anxious to get a photograph of the Rough-Legged Buzzard,' he explained, 'and I believe that in recent winters—about this time—it's been seen in Dunglass. Constable Grant has very kindly promised to help me.'

Willie shuffled his feet. 'P-please, sir—I saw one yesterday.'

'What! Are you serious, my boy?'

• 'He's serious all right,' Sandy put in, 'Willie's an expert. He's not much good at anything else, but he does know about birds.'

'This is most interesting. Where did you see it?'

'Above the wood. Y-yonder—between the cliff and the village.'

'Are you sure it wasn't a common buzzard?'

'Quite sure, sir. It was kind of light brown, and its tail was white. No black about it at all.'

'That's right.' The bird-watcher smiled his pleasure. 'Another White of Selbourne in the making, I see!'

Constable Grant cleared his throat. 'If it was flying above the wood yesterday you'll likely be

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seeing it again, Mr. Ingersoll. That wood is full of rabbits.' Then he directed the full glare of his authority on the boys. 'Now, you lot, you have your bicycles among the heather, I see—back there among the boulders. You had better be going!'

They were relieved to get away, though now that events had taken such an advantageous turn Sandy and Jock could have enjoyed more conversation with the unorthodox stranger. They waved to him, however, as they mounted their bicycles, and he waved back.

'Nice, natural boys,' he remarked to his companion. 'But a little perturbed, I think. Were they up to some mischief?'

Constable Grant watched them ride away, along a narrow sheep-track. 'Och, you know what boys are!' he chuckled. 'I was just putting the fear of death into them, so that they'll steer clear of this place in future.'

'I see. Bluffing them a bit?'

'In a way. We don't want any complications—if there *should* be suspicious characters about. Now, Mr. Ingersoll, if you're going back to the village I'll be glad to walk with you—part of the way at least.'

'Fine. Let's go, Constable.'

Inside the station the droning sound started up again, muffled behind the tall reactor.

CHAPTER II

Secret Society

LIKE MOST ministers' sons, Sandy was well accustomed to visitors at tea. His technique with those who had nothing to say about football or fishing or outer space was to maintain a discreet silence, eat as much as possible in quick time and then, in a courtly manner, beg to be excused.

On the evening of his adventure with Jock and Willie at the atomic station he was following his technique with success. Munching at steady speed, he allowed the conversation between his father and mother and their guest to float vaguely about him, like little flurries of snow.

'Thank you, Mrs. Campbell. Just half a cup' The tall, angular lady with the brown beret had voice which was friendly enough but promised nothing of real interest. 'Your scones are delicious,' she added.

The Rev. Walter Campbell chuckled. 'My wife's scones are famous. Fabulous sums have been offered for the recipe, but she gives nothing away!'

'It was most kind of you to ask me to tea,' said Miss Cunningham, sipping with genteel precision. 'A stranger in a strange land—all that kind of thing. But as soon as I arrived this morning Major Morrison advised me to visit the Manse. "Mr. Campbell

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knows the archaeology of Dunglass better than anybody," he said. "And Mrs. Campbell's scones are second to none!"

Everyone laughed with the exception of Sandy, who was too busy to indulge in frivolity. But as time went on and his appetite decreased, he found that in spite of himself he was beginning to take notice of what the lady was saying.

It appeared that she was a distant relative of Major Morrison's. Some weeks ago she had written to say that she was coming north to study the Dunglass Standing Stones, which were situated on the high moor beyond the atomic station, and he had offered her the hospitality of his house.

'You'll find the Standing Stones most interesting,' promised Mr. Campbell, whose broad tanned face belied his reputation as a scholar. 'Especially those with the cup-markings, which rather resemble the Newton Stone in Aberdeen.'

'So I ~~under~~stand. I'm writing a book on the old stone circles of Scotland, and it certainly wouldn't be complete without a mention of Druidical influence in Kintyre. Are *you* interested in archaeology—er—Sandy, isn't it?'

Finding himself suddenly in the limelight, Sandy gulped and swallowed. 'Er—well, I don't really know, Miss Cunningham.'

'He's more concerned about atoms and space ships,' remarked Mrs. Campbell, with a motherly smile. 'He and his friends spent all this afternoon up at the atomic station—admiring it from a distance, I gather.'

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Miss Cunningham sighed. 'That's the modern trend, I suppose. Though you must remember, Sandy—a proper vision of the future can only be based upon a knowledge of history. Do you attend the village school?'

'Yes.'

'It's a Junior Secondary,' explained his father. 'He'll be going to the Grammar School in Kinloch next year.'

'I see.' The scrutiny of her mild brown eyes made Sandy squirm. 'He's a fine strong boy,' she went on. 'With some spirit, too, as I can see from his red hair!'

Mrs. Campbell laughed. 'If he got it cut—and would comb it oftener—he might look a little more respectable!'

Sandy was growing hot and sweaty. 'Mum,' he said, 'would you excuse me now? Jock and Willie are coming.'

'Are you sure you've had enough tea?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'Very well, dear—you may go.'

He bowed to Miss Cunningham and left the room with dignity. But later on, when it became dark and he foregathered with his friends in the toolshed, he confessed his shame.

'Honestly, chaps, they were getting me down. If there's one thing I hate it's being discussed in my presence!'

Jock was sympathetic. 'I know what you mean. "Such a fine big boy—and his manners are so nice!" Etcetera, etcetera!'

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'Exactly! And Dad and Mum were every bit as bad as Miss Cunningham.'

Willie thought it time to change the subject. 'I've brought some sweets,' he said. 'Anybody like one?'

It was a rash question. Next moment the paper bag was snatched from his pocket, and the others, with the aid of a small electric torch, began to probe its contents.

'It—it's only a quarter pound of toffees,' he pointed out.

'Well, isn't our motto share and share alike?' said Sandy.

'Yes—but I *bought* them!'

This statement was ignored.

'How many toffees altogether?' asked Jock.

Sandy made a careful count. 'Eleven. Four each for you and me, and three for the child.'

'M'm, that's pretty fair.'

'It isn't fair at all!' protested Willie. 'It was my money that——'

'Look here,' interrupted Sandy as one determined to carry out a painful duty, 'Jock and I allow you to come with us everywhere we go. We look after you and keep all the big boys from bullying you. Don't you think you ought to be a *little* grateful?'

Willie sniffed.

'And another thing. This toolshed we're in—it's in the Manse garden, and actually I ought to be charging you rent for *being* here.'

'Oh, all right,' replied Willie, wondering why justice always eluded him. 'I don't -'

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Jock slapped him on the back. 'That's the spirit! But remember—not everybody would be as patient with you as Sandy and me.'

'Just to show you how kind we really are,' said Sandy, 'here's Jock's bar of chocolate, which he won from me, because he touched the fence. I'm going to break it into three equal parts—one for each of us.'

'That's jolly decent of you!'

'Not at all! Here—we'll keep the toffee till later. It's time we got down to business.'

Willie bowed round his portion like a small fastidious dog, then popped it into his mouth. 'What business?' he asked.

'Well, I've been thinking. Remember what Constable Grant was saying—about security?'

'M'm—he was all steamed up about it.' Jock had begun to chew enjoyably. 'You'd think he was Sir Wilfred Steele's right-hand man.'

'That's just it. If you ask me, there's a spy about!'

'A—a spy!' stammered Willie.

'Yes—and here's the point. Constable Grant hasn't enough brains to spot him by himself. He needs help.'

'He's far too fat as well,' said Jock. 'If he saw a spy and tried to catch him he'd be left miles behind!'

'Exactly.' Sandy swallowed. 'I propose we form ourselves into a secret society to assist him in his investigations.'

The toolshed had an earthen floor and smelt of

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artificial manure. The boys were sitting on up-turned potato-boxes, and in the short silence which followed this exciting suggestion they heard an owl hooting in the trees outside. Sandy kept his torch alight. To meditate on spies in total darkness would have been unthinkable.

'It's a great idea,' said Jock at last. 'But we don't want to *tell* Constable Grant.'

'Of course not. That would be fatal. The plan would be to make our inquiries *in secret*.'

Willie moved his box a little closer to his friends. 'But why should *we* bother about a spy?'

'Because we're patriots!' Jock's reproof was immediate and sharp. 'If there's a spy he'll be working for another country, and we don't want our atomic secrets given away.'

'What about the Secret Service—the British Secret Service, I mean? It's a job for them.'

'That's true enough,' conceded Sandy. 'But they didn't manage to stop Burgess and MacLean, did they? Anyway what do the British Secret Service know about Dunglass? But *we* know it, and we'll be far more likely to notice if anything queer does happen.'

Willie sighed. 'Oh, well, maybe you're right,' he said.

'Certainly, I'm right! And look here—there's something else. If we do catch a spy I expect we'll get a reward.'

Willie's eyes widened. 'You mean *money*?'

'M'm. Maybe fifty pounds.'

'Fifty pounds!'

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'P'rhaps not so much. But it doesn't matter—we could be doing with some money. After buying that bar of chocolate I've only got ninepence ha'penny in my bank!'

'I've got nothing at all,' confessed Jock. 'And there's a big article about my father in the paper this week. Those prizes he's giving to the school. "Generosity to Children", the headline says. It just shows you!'

'I've got half a crown,' Willie said. 'But I was wanting to buy a new bird-book, and it's fifteen shillings.'

'Then here's your chance to earn far more than fifteen shillings!' Sandy's enthusiasm was infectious. 'Are you game? We're secret agents, starting from tonight, eh?'

Jock nodded his black curly head. 'Okay, I'm game.'

But Willie was more cautious. 'So am I,' he said, 'as long as we don't need to do any shooting or stabbing.'

'That'll depend,' replied Sandy, judicially. 'Anyway, from tonight we'll all be on the look-out for clues, and——'

He broke off as a gust of wind whined round the shed and something tapped loudly on the roof. Willie nearly tied himself into a knot in his efforts to move even closer to the others.

'Gosh, what's that?' he breathed.

For a time no one said a word.

Then Sandy laughed. 'Keep your hair on! You know, I was scared myself for a minute. But it's just

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the wind getting up, and the branch of that old tree touching the slates.'

His friends relaxed. But tight-strung nerves obviously needed refreshment and the bag of toffees was handed round. There was an interval of pleasant sucking noises.

Finally, Jock said: 'By the way, Sandy, what are we going to call ourselves?'

'That's a problem. Any ideas, Willie?'

'Well, maybe you won't like it, but seeing we're kind of mixed up with atoms and things, what about "The Atom Chasers"?'

'Yes,' said Jock, slowly. 'That's good — I think.'

'It is good,' exclaimed Sandy. 'By golly, Willie, you're a genius! "The Atom Chasers"—it sounds perfect!'

'I—I'm glad you like it.'

'Of course we like it. And to prove it Jock and I will only take *three* toffees each, and you can have five.'

As he received his share Willie blushed. 'Gosh, you're awful kind!'

'Don't mention it,' returned Sandy, with magnanimity. 'Now then,' he added, 'it's time we all went home or the usual rows will be starting up. We'll keep our eyes skinned over the week-end and meet again—here—on Monday night.'

'Okay,' said Jock and Willie together.

'But remember this—this is a *secret* society, and we mustn't tell *anyone* what we're doing!' He got up, returning his potato-box to a corner. 'Well, Jock,

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what about us seeing Willie back to the farm? I don't suppose he wants to go alone.'

'Gosh, no!' breathed Willie. 'Not on a dark night like this, and with a spy about!'

CHAPTER III

Adventure in the Dark

ON MONDAY evening, as he entered the study, Sandy found that his father was entertaining a visitor. He stood quietly inside the door, waiting for an opportunity to speak and listening with some admiration to Major Morrison's fiery words.

'I tell you, padre, it's an absolute disgrace! Here we were, living in peace and quiet. Then along comes this infernal atomic station, and the whole parish becomes a hotbed of suspicion and iniquity! What are you going to do about it?'

'There's not much I *can* do,' replied Mr. Campbell, mildly. 'And after all, the scientists do come to Church fairly regularly.'

'Bah! Half of them spies!' The laird was a spare-built man of nearly seventy, with a bald head and a bushy white moustache, but as he thumped the arm of his chair it was evident that he still possessed some youthful vigour. 'This morning I met Sir Wilfred Steele,' he went on, 'and he had the nerve to suggest the very opposite. "If there are spies," he said to me, "they'll be found outside my station".'

Suddenly Major Morrison noticed Sandy and turned to him with an alarming shout. 'Yes, well may your eyes goggle, my boy! What do *you* think about it all?'

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'I—I—I don't know, sir.'

'Well, *I* know! Dunglass is ruined. Completely lost its character. Grouse disappearing from my moors, salmon from my rivers. All my men demanding higher wages, to be upsides with those ungodly test-tube wallahs!'

'Oh, come now,' smiled Mr. Campbell, 'Aren't you being a little hard on the scientists? After all——'

Major Morrison thumped his chair again. 'I won't sit here and be contradicted, padre—even though this is your study! I came to enlist your aid in petitioning the Government, but if you won't support me—well, I can go elsewhere.'

'I have every sympathy with your position—really I have. But we petitioned the Government before, and——'

'Listen to me!' The laird's face was as red as the Army coat he had probably worn as a subaltern. 'You know Miss Cunningham, my second cousin? Right! Well, yesterday afternoon—on the quiet on a Sabbath day—she went up on the moor to make a recce of the Standing Stones. Perfectly innocent occupation, you'll admit. But what happened? That confounded idiot, Grant—our fat, asinine policeman—he was mooning about on the road and had the impertinence to tell her to take a different route—to keep clear of the station! I ask you—what's the place coming to when an ordinary, decent woman finds herself chivvied about like a criminal?'

The minister sighed. 'But if Constable Grant has been ordered to keep an eye on things——'

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'Bah! Grant couldn't keep his eye on Paisley! D'you know what Miss Cunningham told me? After she left him she looked back, and there he was talking to that bird-watcher fellow. Ingersoll his name is—with a black beard. And *he* wasn't warned off! Oh, no! He went straight up towards the station! I tell you, padre—I'm a quiet and patient man, as you know, but when she told me that I completely lost my temper!'

Mr. Campbell admitted that the incident was rather strange; and in the short silence which followed while the laird regained breath, Sandy took his chance.

'Er—excuse me, Dad. I came to ask if I could go out for a while.'

Major Morrison swung round. 'Going out, are you? Mind you don't get your throat cut, boy! Anything may happen in these times—especially when our only representative of law and order is Constable Grant!'

'Have you finished your lessons?' asked Mr. Campbell.

'Yes. We don't have many on a Monday. Jock and Willie are expecting me.'

'All right—you may go.'

'Thank you, Dad.'

'But don't be late. You know how anxious your mother gets on these dark nights.'

Sandy had almost made good his escape when another hoarse bellow stopped him in his tracks. 'And while I remember—don't go raiding my greenhouse, boy!'

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'I—I wouldn't do that, sir.'

'Humph, probably not. More likely some of those blasted scientists. Good night to you.'

Sandy left the room, carefully closing the door behind him. But the Major's tirade was by no means finished. Lurching to his feet and standing with his back to the fire he glared down at Mr. Campbell.

'Meant to tell you, padre—not even my garden is safe nowadays! Last night I heard voices—middle of the night it was. I got up and opened my bedroom window, and there was someone racing like mad across my lawn. I swear he'd been in my greenhouse. In the morning the door was wide open, and a dozen of my hyacinth bulbs were ruined by the frost!'

'Too bad! But surely——'

'I gave him a fright, though.' The laird chuckled, grimly. 'Luckily I keep a gun in my bedroom—fully loaded—and I emptied it at his heels. Next time it happens he'll get a taste of lead, I promise you!'

Mr. Campbell persuaded his guest to sit down again and offered him a cigarette. It was time he steered the conversation into smoother channels or blood-vessels might be burst.

As the other puffed in an angry silence he said: 'By the way, there's this question of the church steeple. You brought it up at the last meeting of the Congregational Board. I think we have enough funds to start repairing it now.'

Major Morrison snatched the cigarette from the depths of his bushy moustache. For a moment his

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look was sharp and fierce; then suddenly his blue eyes twinkled. 'Hum! Outflanking movement! Want to change the subject, eh?'

'Perhaps I do,' smiled the minister.

'H'm, very clever, very clever! All right, padre, tell me about the steeple. But don't think I've forgotten the petition to the Government!'

Some time later, long after Major Morrison had left the Manse to return home, the boys were lying among the heather, chilled by excitement and the strong east wind, in a strategic position outside the atomic station fence. An eerie darkness enveloped them, relieved only by the stars and a slip of moon. True to form, Willie was complaining of the long wait.

'We've been here for less than ten minutes,' replied Sandy, in an exasperated whisper. 'But if you want to go home, get your bicycle and for goodness' sake beat it!'

'I—I'd beat it all right, only it's too dark to go by myself.'

'Can't you be patient? Something's bound to happen sooner or later.'

'Yes—but what?'

Sandy gave it up. It was Jock, taking a deep breath, who answered this annoying question. 'We're here to keep watch,' he said. 'Detectives *always* keep watch. And spies usually operate in the dark.'

Willie sniffled. 'I don't believe there is a spy.'

'Oh, you're just like Major Morrison!' growled Sandy. 'He believes all the spies are *inside* the fence.'

ADVENTURE IN THE DARK

But Constable Grant doesn't believe that. Neither does Sir Wilfred Steele.'

'Well, maybe I'm wrong.'

'You always are,' Jock told him. 'Except about birds.'

The minutes ticked away, and Willie's sniffles became more frequent. There were lights in the atomic station, but no sound came from the shadowy huts. In the region of the fence nothing stirred except some long grass waving in the wind. Once the droning sound rose up from behind the reactor, sending a shiver up and down the boys' backs; but in a short time it died away again.

The dim expanse of moorland hemmed them in, and even Sandy's enthusiasm as a detective began to wane. He was wondering if he ought to suggest going home when suddenly, some distance away along the line of barbed wire, there was a crunching noise, as if someone had stepped on a brittle root of heather.

'I say,' breathed Willie whose eyes were sharp, 'look down yonder—near the side gate!'

They lay stiff and tense against the damp ground. A shadow moved away from the barbed wire towards the moorland track.

'He didn't leave by the gate,' whispered Sandy. 'I bet you anything he came out through the fence. Golly, there's another man, trailing him!'

They could scarcely believe their eyes. From behind a rickle of boulders not far from their own position, a second shadow had risen up and was following the first. The boys waited motionless

THE ATOM CHASERS

until it became abundantly clear that both were heading for Major Morrison's house, a mile away in the direction of the ridge of hills.

'Wh—what are we going to do?' asked Willie.

Sandy got to his feet. 'Trail them both, of course. Come on—they won't hear us if we keep far enough behind.'

'What about our bikes?'

'Never mind them just now. We can come back later.'

Crouching low, and taking cover behind every little slope and tussock, the boys kept pace with the strangers, fifty yards behind them. Sandy led, with Jock close at his shoulder. Willie brought up the rear, afraid of what might happen but even more afraid of missing anything.

Presently, the high wall round Major Morrison's house loomed in sight. Sandy motioned to his friends, and they stopped behind a convenient boulder to survey the position.

'Gosh, this is g-getting exciting!' gulped Willie.

Sandy nodded. 'Thank goodness you're not complaining—for once! Can you still see them, Jock?'

'Yes. The first man is making for the front gate. The other is squatting behind those bushes by the roadside—just watching, I think.'

'Good! I tell you what—if we nipped up on that wall, above the greenhouse there, we could see if the first man goes into the house or not. Jock and I will go, Willie. You stay here and keep an eye on the second man.'

'All right, but——'

ADVENTURE IN THE DARK

'Don't argue! And if he goes in through the front gate after the first man, give us a call like a peewit. You know how to do it?'

'Yes.'

'And for goodness' sake, keep quiet! They're both desperate characters, I should think.'

Leaving Willie trembling behind the boulder, Sandy and Jock made a little detour to the left, creeping along a shallow ditch until they reached the wall. Then, out of sight of the watcher at the gate, they scrambled up and balanced precariously on the parapet. Above them the branches of several trees inside the grounds swayed and sighed and hid the stars. Below them patches of moonlight were reflected on the glass roof of the greenhouse. An indefinable bulky shadow some distance away was the Major's house.

The white gravel on the drive, as it curved in some fifty yards from the front gate, was plainly visible against the dark background of lawn. The boys watched it carefully.

After a few seconds a blur appeared on the white. Below the blur twinkled trousered legs.

Sandy whispered: 'He's coming this way—across the lawn to the greenhouse!'

'He's a bit smaller than I thought,' returned Jock, through slightly chattering teeth. Then he gripped his friend's arm as the call of a peewit came faintly to them. 'That's Willie—signalling. The other man's coming in by the front gate, too!'

'This is going to be a party!' Sandy's excitement made his voice unsteady. 'Look here, Jock—there's

THE ATOM CHASERS

something familiar about this first man. If we crawl towards the end of the wall we'll be able to see him better.'

'Right.'

They eased themselves along the parapet, clutching the narrow edges, while the unknown figure approached soundlessly on the grass. But all at once, with no warning, a brick broke loose from under Jock's hand. He slipped sideways. Sandy made a wild effort to save him but clawed empty air. Next moment both had completely overbalanced. Their fingers rasped on the smooth coping, and in a surge of desperation they felt themselves falling.

With a crash which splintered the silence of the November night they plummeted down through the roof of the greenhouse. In a shower of broken glass they landed on their knees on the earthen floor inside, surrounded by pots and plants and the strong scent of hyacinths.

They scrambled to their feet.

'Phew! Are you all right, Jock?'

'I—I think so. Gosh, it's lucky we're not cut!'

'My *knee's* cut—but nothing much.' Sandy groped about in the dark. 'How on earth are we going to get out of here?'

There was a sound outside. Closer and closer it came, like an approaching typhoon, until at last it resolved itself into an angry bellow.

'Who's there? Who's breaking into my greenhouse!'

'My goodness!' breathed Jock. 'That's not the spy—it's Major Morrison!'

ADVENTURE IN THE DARK

The door was thrust open, letting in a stream of moonlight and east wind.

'Now then—I've got you covered! Come out, whoever you are!'

Sandy glimpsed a shot-gun pointed straight in his direction.

CHAPTER IV

The New Member

‘I SEE you!’ roared Major Morrison. ‘Put up your hands, you villains, and come quietly!’

The boys edged forward into the patch of moonlight at the greenhouse door. A spare and irate figure towered above them, his shot-gun a fearful instrument of death and destruction.

‘We—we’re terribly sorry, sir,’ gulped Sandy. ‘We didn’t mean any harm.’

The Major lowered the gun, and his menacing attitude changed to one of astonishment. ‘Bless my soul—do my eyes deceive me! Sandy Campbell and—and Jock whatever your name is! This is going to cause a sensation in Dunglass, I can tell you! The minister’s son and the postmaster’s son—common burglars!’

‘We’re not burglars,’ pleaded Jock. ‘Honestly, we’re not!’

‘Then what the dickens are you doing in my greenhouse?’

Sandy took a deep breath. ‘We—we fell through the roof, sir. From the top of the wall.’

The laird glanced up and saw the splintered glass. ‘Damme, so you did! It’s a miracle you weren’t killed—though serve you right if you had been!’

THE NEW MEMBER

Five panes in smithereens! You young scamps, I'll make your fathers pay for this!'

'We weren't trying to break in. Word of honour. We were—we were following somebody.'

'Aha—typical! Trying to talk your way out of it, eh?'

'No, sir. If you'll just let me explain.'

Sandy gave a hurried description of events, during which the Major's ferocity appeared to wane. But in the end his comment was scathing enough.

'D'you expect me to believe a story like that?' he demanded.

'If you call to Willie at the gate he—he'll corroborate our evidence.'

'H'm, all the jail-bird jargon at your finger-tips! Who's this fellow—this Willie?'

'The farmer's son from Strone.'

'I see. The whole parish seems to be involved.' Taking a step towards the door he bellowed: 'You—Willie Niven—come here! If you don't, I'll put Constable Grant on your trail. That should bring him at the double!' he remarked.

'Please, sir,' said Sandy, 'don't be too hard on him when he comes.'

'Why not?'

'Well, he had nothing to do with all this. I mean—I was the ringleader. Even Jock just *happened* to be with me.'

The moonlight fell on the laird's face, and surprisingly an amused twinkle shone in his eyes. 'So you're the ringleader?' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

‘Good company commander—covering up for your troops, eh? H’m, glad to find a boy willing to take *some* responsibility nowadays!’

There was a sniffle at the door. ‘P-please, sir—this is me.’

Major Morrison swung round. ‘Ah, the redoubtable Willie! Company rearguard, eh? Well, don’t stand there with your mouth open! Come in and let’s have a look at you.’

‘I—I never did anything, sir! Please don’t tell my father.’

‘We’ll see about that! Now, speak up, boy! These friends of yours, they say you saw two people coming up my drive. Is this true?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Know who they were?’

‘N-no, sir.’

‘It was too dark,’ Sandy put in. ‘But the smaller one was kind of familiar.’

‘M’m.’ The Major pondered, only to burst out again with a wave of his gun. ‘Then why the dickens didn’t I see them? I came out of the house as soon as I heard the crash, but there wasn’t a soul about as far as I could see.’

‘P-please, sir——’

‘Yes, speak up, Willie! Don’t dither!’

‘Just after the crash one of the people came running back—out through the front gate. The bigger one. He went away towards the atomic station.’

‘Fair enough. But where’s the other one? Tell me that, boy!’

THE NEW MEMBER

It was Sandy who answered. 'Perhaps he's still about, sir. Among the trees out there.'

Major Morrison glared at him. 'Why couldn't you have suggested that before!' he exclaimed, thrusting the gun into the crook of his arm. 'Come on—we'll make a recce of the grounds. And if we find him—I tell you I'll blow his brains out! Follow me. Single file—company commander at the rear. You're under the C.O. now, remember!'

As they went out into the gusty darkness under the trees Sandy whispered to his friends: 'We'll get out of this scrape yet, if we humour him!'

'Gosh, I don't see much humour about it,' replied Willie.

But though during the next twenty minutes they made a thorough search of the grounds, the only living creature they spotted was a large owl which flapped disgustedly on a branch above their heads. Once or twice the Major had his gun to his shoulder ready to fire. Each time, however, Sandy was able to point out that he was aiming at the shadow of a bush in the moonlight.

Finally, he led the boys indoors and into his study, which was lined with books and hunting trophies and warmed by a cosy fire of peats.

Muttering fiercely, he put his gun into a rack in one corner. 'Not a sign of him. Must have skedaddled like the other one. Now then, stand at ease all of you. No need to treat my house like a parade-ground.'

He turned away towards a heavy mahogany side-board, and the boys exchanged glances.

THE ATOM CHASERS

'Everything's going fine,' whispered Jock.

Sandy nodded. 'Just the job! But remember, Willie—you keep quiet. Let Jock and me do the talking.'

'Okay.'

The Major returned with a tray of tumblers and ginger beer bottles. 'A good C.O. always looks after the comfort of his troops. You're bound to be thirsty after all that tramping about. Fill a glass for the others, company commander. And one for yourself.'

Sandy did as he was told, while the laird took a larger bottle from the sideboard and measured out what he described as a special issue. 'Something more to my taste than ginger-ale,' he remarked. 'Well, we didn't get that chap tonight—but here's to the next time!'

They drank, standing in a solemn circle by the fire.

'That's better,' said the Major, smacking his lips and motioning his guests to sit down. 'Must say I've commanded troops a lot worse than you are.'

He settled comfortably in a leather arm-chair. 'Now—tell me—how did you happen to be about my place? I mean, nine o'clock at night—boys should be in bed.'

There was an embarrassed silence.

'Come, come—none of this shillyshallying! Answer me—you, company commander!'

'It—it's a secret,' said Sandy.

'What! Don't give me that kind of stuff, or I'll be remembering my greenhouse roof again!'

Sandy gulped down the last of his ginger-beer.

THE NEW MEMBER

Squirming uneasily he went on: 'As a matter of fact, sir, we're a secret society.'

The Major's glass rattled on a side-table, and his bushy eyebrows almost disappeared among his hair. 'Secret Society! Bless my soul, what's the place coming to! We'll be having witch-doctors next!'

'If you promise not to say a word to anybody,' replied Sandy, 'we'll tell you all about it.'

For a moment the laird was taken aback. Then he grinned in the boyish way which was such a surprising accompaniment in his bustle and bluster. 'You wili?' he said. 'That's extremely civil of you!'

'Not at aii, sir. But it means that you'll have to *join* us. If an outsider knew what we were doing—well, it wouldn't be a secret society any longer, would it?'

'You're right, boy! That's logic.'

'Then promise not to tell a soul.'

'Very well. I—er—I promise.'

'All right. The first thing you ought to know is that we're called "The Atom Chasers".'

'The what!'

'"The Atom Chasers". You see, we've come to the conclusion that there's something fishy going on in Dunglass—in connection with the atomic station.'

'H'm, you're right again!' Major Morrison was obviously impressed. 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, eh? Go on, company commander—go on!'

'We think there's a spy in the parish—somebody who wants to steal the atom secrets and sell them to a foreign power. So we decided to keep a look-out.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

For anything unusual, I mean—or for anyone acting suspiciously. That's why we were at the station tonight.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you boys!' The white moustache puffed out. 'I've been thinking along the same lines exactly!'

'We saw this person appear outside the fence,' Sandy continued. 'As if he'd come through it. Then the other man started stalking him. So we followed and—well, you know the rest, sir.'

'It was awful eerie in the dark,' said Willie. 'With the owls hooting.'

'This is highly intriguing!' The Major crossed his legs and coughed. 'Look here, you've been good enough to offer me membership of your society. All right, I accept.'

Emboldened by the ginger-beer, Jock and Willie were loud in their applause. But Sandy was more cautious. 'Remember—not a word to anybody,' he warned.

Their host flushed purple. 'What the blazes do you mean, boy? I've given you my word, haven't I? And a Morrison's word is as good as his bond——'

Suddenly the door opened. The boys looked round to see Miss Cunningham standing there, prim and angular in a dark grey suit, her iron-grey hair piled high.

'I was in my room,' she said, 'working on my archaeological book, when I heard voices. Dear me, isn't it the minister's son?'

Sandy got up politely. 'Er—yes. These are my two friends, Jock and Willie.'

THE NEW MEMBER

'Delighted to meet you.' Miss Cunningham was as dry as the dusty stones she studied. 'I didn't know you were expecting visitors, Geoffrey.'

'Well—er—neither did I, as a matter of fact. Truth is, I found two of them——'

Sandy coughed and frowned, and the Major broke off with a startled expression. 'No, no,' he boomed, camouflaging his embarrassment with a light laugh. 'Getting mixed up in my old age! Pals of mine, these boys. Dropped in for a friendly chat and some ginger-ale.'

'I see.' If Miss Cunningham had suspicions she didn't show them. 'Sandy appears to have cut his knee.'

'I—er—I slipped on something in the dark.'

'Yes. Boys at your age are always having accidents. But when you go home I should advise a little iodine.'

'Okay—I mean, very well, Miss Cunningham.'

She prepared to return to her work, but at the door she paused, swinging her horn-rimmed spectacles. 'You know, you boys should take up archaeology. A most fascinating subject, and Dunglass is simply teeming with examples. Such a pity—with so many real-life adventures to be studied in the past—that children should be more interested in space ships and atoms and—er—secret societies!'

Major Morrison flushed, and the boys looked up towards the ceiling. But Miss Cunningham was unaware of their discomfort. 'Good night all,' she said. 'Remember to put iodine on your knee, Sandy.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

When she had gone the laird shook his head. 'These archaeologists!' he muttered. 'Can't understand them! Would you believe it, she spent all this afternoon grubbing about on the moor—up near the Standing Stones. Came home delighted because she'd found some cave or other. The Anchorite's Cave, I think it's called.'

'I—I know it, sir,' said Willie, eagerly. 'It's in the big sandstone cliff beyond the atom station. I once found a gull's nest there.'

'You did, eh?' The Major grinned. All of a sudden, however, he grew serious again. 'Well, we've a lot more than birds and archaeologists to think about from now on. I suggest it's time you all went home. When shall we—I mean, when is the next meeting of the society?'

'Tomorrow night,' replied Sandy.

'Good! The sooner the better. We can pool information and decide what to do.'

'We usually meet in the toolshed in the Manse garden.'

'I see. Excellent idea. Then we shan't be interrupted by archaeologists every five minutes. What time?'

'Seven o'clock. It's quite dark, and we've all finished of our lessons by then. But—er—excuse me, sir, there's just one point before we go.'

'Yes, yes?'

'It's pretty late now, and we'll all be liable to get a row from our parents. If you could square things up—'

The Major chuckled. 'Leave it to the C.O., boy!

THE NEW MEMBER

I'll make sure that none of you run into trouble.'

'Thank you very much,' said Sandy, as Jock gave him a congratulatory nudge.

They were about to leave when Willie piped up: 'P-please, sir, what kind of sweeties do you like best?'

'Sweeties! What the deuce are you talking about?'

'Well—er—I usually bring the sweeties. To our meetings, I mean——'

'H'm, very kind of you to consider my tastes. But what about your new member bringing some chocolates on this occasion?'

'Chocolates—gosh!'

'The very thing, sir,' said Sandy, quickly clinching the deal.

'Well, that's settled.' Major Morrison put his arm about Willie's narrow shoulders. 'Come away, now—I haven't enjoyed myself so much since I was a boy, sixty years ago!'

CHAPTER V

Suspicion

WHILE 'The Atom Chasers' were at Dunglass House, acquiring their new member, Sandy's father and mother were entertaining Mr. Ingersoll in the Manse. At church the previous morning Mr. Campbell had asked the bird-watcher to call whenever he wished, and he had availed himself of the invitation, sooner than anyone had expected, to come and show off some photographs of the Rough-Legged Buzzard.

'You seem so interested in my work that as soon as I got the negatives printed I decided you should be the first to see them. Even though it *is* rather late.'

'Simply splendid.' The minister forced a smile. 'Mrs. Campbell and I happen to be just a trifle worried at the moment. Sandy's not usually out after nine o'clock.'

Mr. Ingersoll's pale, thin face took on a startled expression. 'You—er—you don't suspect an accident——'

'No, no. Everything's all right—I feel sure.'

'In fact your visit is quite opportune,' put in Mrs. Campbell. 'It will keep our minds occupied and prevent us imagining things.'

SUSPICION

'I see.' He stroked his pointed beard, as if uncertain of what to do. Then he made up his mind. 'Well, here they are,' he said, spreading half a dozen prints on the table. 'I'm rather proud of them.'

'Indeed you should be!' Mrs. Campbell tried to sound enthusiastic. 'This one particularly is superb. What a majestic-looking bird!'

'I took that this afternoon. I saw it leave the wood and fly towards the cliff—you know, the sandstone cliff beyond the atomic station. I stalked it and saw it settle at last on the very summit. Quite effective, I think.'

The minister studied the photograph more closely. 'You must have used a telescopic lens?' he said.

'Oh, yes. That's an absolute essential in bird-photography.'

Some minutes later, while they were still admiring the pictures, the phone rang on Mr. Campbell's desk. With a quick glance at his wife, and a muttered apology to Mr. Ingersoll, he went quickly across and lifted the receiver.

'Dunglass Manse . . . Oh, it's you, Major . . . Well, that is a relief . . . Yes, yes, I see . . . Thank you very much. Good night.' He put down the phone and came back to the table, chuckling. 'Well, there's a good one! Sandy and his friends have been spending the evening with Major Morrison.'

Mrs. Campbell sat down suddenly, sighing with relief. 'Oh, thank goodness! I was so worried.'

'They met on the road, I gather, and he took them in and gave them ginger-beer! Sandy's on his way home now.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

'It's extraordinary! He's so fearsome, as a rule.'

Mr. Ingersoll had been listening with sober attention. 'I believe Major Morrison is a most redoubtable character,' he said. 'I've never actually met him, but it seems he's quite a fire-eater.'

'He's all that,' smiled the minister. 'I'd never have expected him to make friends with the boys.'

'Has he been in Dunglass for long?'

'Oh, all his days—except when he was in the Army during the First World War. His family have owned the land hereabouts for the past three hundred years.'

'Constable Grant tells me he bears rather a grudge against the atomic scientists.'

Mrs. Campbell laughed. 'Oh, that's just his way. He dislikes change of any kind.' Shrugging the subject aside, she touched Mr. Ingersoll's arm. 'Please—let's see those other photos. We'll be able to appreciate them much better—*now*.'

Their guest was still with them when Sandy came in; but soon afterwards he took his leave, presenting Mrs. Campbell with one of the photographs. It was the following evening before his visit assumed a sensational aspect.

At a few minutes before seven the boys were in the toolshed, awaiting with impatience the arrival of Major Morrison.

'D'you really think he'll come?' asked Willie, edging in out of the dark into the pool of torchlight.

'Course he'll come,' replied Sandy. 'Didn't you hear him—a Morrison's word is as good as his bond!'

SUSPICION

Jock nodded. 'He's a jolly good old sport. Gosh, I bet he gets a surprise when he hears what we've got to tell him!'

There was a small sound outside, then a hoarse whisper: 'You in there, boys?'

'It's him!' squeaked Willie.

They gave him a wheelbarrow to sit in, and to their relief he accepted it as a matter of course. 'Had the dickens of a job finding your toolshed!' he complained. 'Dark as pitch among the trees out there. But it ought to be fairly clear in about an hour, when the moon comes up.'

Willie touched his tweed-clad knee. 'You—er—you didn't forget the chocolate, sir?'

'What! Bless my soul, Willie, I didn't see you in the corner there.' He chuckled. 'Think I'd forget the rations, eh? No fear. Catch!'

It was an enormous box, wrapped in cellophane paper. Willie's fingers shook as he opened it. 'Gee—this must have cost about five shillings!' he exclaimed.

'Never mind what it cost! Share them out, boy!'

There was a spell of enjoyable activity, followed by steady munching.

But at last the Major cleared his throat. 'Well, now—down to brass tacks. What have we discovered since last night?'

Sandy swallowed and took a deep breath. Quietly he said: 'We're on the track of something, sir!'

'We are, eh?'

'Willie's done a terrific bit of detection. Did we tell you he was an expert on birds?'

THE ATOM CHASERS

'You did.'

'Well, last night when I came home Mr. Ingersoll was in the Manse. You know who I mean, sir?'

'That bird-watching fellow?'

'Yes. He was showing Mum and Dad some photos he'd taken of a Rough-Legged Buzzard. Mum liked one of them so much that he gave it to her to keep, and tonight before we came to the toolshed here I was showing it to Jock and Willie—and Willie says it's not the photo of a Rough-Legged Buzzard at all!'

'Good gracious!'

'It's just an ordinary buzzard,' said Willie, eagerly. 'You can see its tail—quite black.'

'And the Rough-Legged Buzzard's tail is white, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

The dark outhouse was quite still. Casually the Major said: 'So it looks as if Mr. Ingersoll doesn't know much about birds after all?'

'That's right, sir.' Jock was almost choking with suppressed excitement. 'No real bird-watcher would ever make a mistake like that.'

'Confound it, I agree with you. This is serious.'

'But it's not all, sir,' said Sandy, quickly. 'Mum and Dad told me he kept asking questions—about almost everyone in the parish. How long they've been in Dunglass—what kind of people they are—if they ever go abroad.'

The Major twirled his moustache and settled more comfortably in the barrow. 'Ingersoll, eh? If it comes to that, what do we know about *him*?'

SUSPICION

'Exactly what I said to Sandy,' returned Jock. 'The only thing is, he's quite friendly with Constable Grant. But maybe that's only bluff.'

'Could be, boy. In any case, this society has reason to be grateful to Willie for his expert advice.'

Squirming with mingled modesty and gratification, Willie slipped from his potato-box. As he picked himself up from the earthen floor, Sandy went on: 'But we've found out something else, sir.'

'More about Ingersoll?'

'No—a different line altogether. You know that Jock here is the postmaster's son?'

'Oh, is he, indeed?' Suddenly the Major sat forward, rumbling like a volcano. 'Well, he can tell his father that I want my mail delivered a little more promptly! Perfect disgrace—over an hour late this morning!' Then he subsided. Smiling apologetically, he said: 'But—er—that's not the point, is it? Proceed, company commander.'

'Jock will tell you himself.'

Recovering from the momentary shock which the laird's outburst had given him, Jock took up the story. 'Well, today when I was home for lunch one of the postmen came in and showed my father a thing like an electric light bulb—only with straight sides, if you see what I mean. Dad said it was a kind of radio valve, but it hadn't a maker's name and was probably foreign. The postman had found it on the moor—up near the Anchorite's Cave—on the short cut he takes between Strone and your house, sir.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

'H'm—no wonder he was late with my letters! But—er—I don't quite see——'

Sandy burst out: 'Gosh, I thought you'd see at once, sir! If Mr. Ingersoll is a foreign spy he may be sending messages abroad, using a secret radio transmitter in the Anchorite's Cave.'

In the torchlight the Major's face was a red study in astonishment. 'Bless my soul!' he exclaimed. 'Excuse my—er—my *dumbness*, boys! That idea just never occurred to me.'

After a time Sandy said: 'Have *you* got any information, sir?'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. Though I went specially to see Sir Wilfred Steele this afternoon—the Director of the station, you know. I tried to find out if he was suspicious of anyone, but he was as close as an oyster. Practically told me to beat it in the end!' Looking crestfallen, he added: 'Not much of an Atom Chaser yet, am I?'

'Oh, you'll improve, sir.' Sandy did his best to comfort him. 'I mean—you haven't had much experience. The important question is, what should we do now?'

Willie thought they should tell Constable Grant about Mr. Ingersoll: but Jock demurred. 'We're only *suspicious* about him,' he pointed out.

'Perfectly correct,' agreed the Major. 'We can't act on suspicion alone, or we'd be in for trouble—libel actions, all that kind of thing. We must find direct evidence before approaching the police.'

Sandy was keen to have a look at the Anchorite's Cave—that very night.

SUSPICION

Major Morrison nodded. 'Make a recce, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

'H'm, that sounds sensible. If there *is* a spy, it's at night he probably sends his messages. I think we should go at once.'

Willie drew in his breath. 'Wh—what if the spy catches us? He might have a pistol!'

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' returned Sandy, in disgust. 'If you're scared, why don't you go home?'

'I—I don't *want* to go home.'

As they got up the laird patted Willie's close-cropped head. 'Stick by the C.O., boy—you'll be all right. If you feel frightened just have another chocolate, eh?'

'Okay, sir.'

'Right! The moon's not up yet, so at first we'd better take the road through the village.'

CHAPTER VI

At the Anchorite's Cave

IN ORDER not to advertise their intentions, the Major and the boys entered the village as if they were enjoying an evening stroll, stopping here and there to look into a shop window. As it happened, however, the local Sports Club was meeting that night, and few people were abroad to see the little group on the dimly lit main street.

But suddenly, as they neared the lamp-standard which marked the end of the built-up area, they saw a stout figure in blue meditating at a corner. It was Constable Grant, and he was looking in their direction.

'Steady the Buffs!' murmured the Major. 'Act quite naturally as we pass him.'

But the policeman was conversationally inclined. As he bade them good evening he planted himself firmly in their path. Glancing up at the erect figure of the laird, he said: 'You have a lot of company, I see.'

'The boys, eh?' Major Morrison gave a humourless laugh, and it was plain that he was thinking rapidly. Then his face cleared. 'Oh—er—I'd thought of starting a troop of Scouts. Tonight I'm showing them how to follow a trail in the dark.'

'As long as they don't do any trailing near the atomic station that will be all right.'

AT THE ANCHORITE'S CAVE

Sandy butted in, righteousness personified. 'We haven't been near it, Constable. Not since you warned us off on Saturday.'

'I'm glad to know it! But I'll be keeping my eye on you just the same!'

The Major rumbled. 'Look here, Grant, these boys are quite harmless! If it's spies you're looking for, well——' He stopped short, as Sandy dug him in the back. 'I mean—bless my soul,' he went on, hurriedly, 'Sandy and Jock are only thirteen, and Willie's not eleven yet——'

'I have my duty to do,' interrupted the policeman, deliberately pompous. 'And don't let them kid you, sir. They're full of original sin, the whole lot of them!'

'Nonsense! But I'll take care they don't get into mischief. Good night, Grant.'

As they moved away his Highland voice came after them: 'Good night, sir. I only hope they'll not be leading you astray!'

They reached the end of the street. Some distance along the deserted country road they crossed the bordering fence and began a long climb to the moor and the Anchorite's Cave. The going was rough, through tussocks of heather and past small peat-hags, but when their eyes grew accustomed to the dark it became easier.

'This is super!' grinned Jock, thoroughly enjoying himself.

But Willie had a different viewpoint. 'As long as the spy doesn't shoot us!' he quavered.

'Oh, pull yourself together, boy!' Major

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Morrison's discomfort was reflected in his tone of irritation. 'Stiff upper lip—I insist on it in all my troops!'

'S—sorry, sir.'

After some twenty minutes, as they scrambled to the top of a rocky bank half a mile from the cliff, they stopped to take a rest.

'Gosh, that was stiff going!' panted Jock. 'Pity we couldn't have used the torch.'

'Don't talk rubbish!' exclaimed the Major, still prickly. 'A torch would give away our position at once. This is a recce—not a frontal attack.'

The boys decided it would be safer to keep quiet. There was a silence, therefore, broken only by the whisper of the night-wind among the heather. Then above distant Ben Alder, bulky and black against the stars, appeared a growing bar of light.

'It—it's the moon!' whispered Willie.

'Correct, boy.' The laird had become more even-tempered. 'Be almost as clear as day soon. Don't you think we should be moving on——'

'I say,' interrupted Jock, suddenly, 'd'you hear anything?'

They listened. High above their heads, but coming closer, was the murmur of an engine.

'Passenger plane from Renfrew,' suggested the Major. 'Heading for America.'

But Sandy, better informed, shook his head. 'Atlantic planes never fly across Dunglass, sir. Too far north.'

'I see. Then what the dickens is that one doing here—at this time of night?'

AT THE ANCHORITE'S CAVE

The unseen aircraft was flying at a considerable altitude, the drone of its engine approaching and receding like atmospherics on the radio. Once or twice it seemed to be going away altogether, but each time it came back, even closer than before.

All of a sudden Willie caught the Major's arm. "L—look, sir!" he stammered. "Up yonder!"

The sandstone cliff was a broad black band against the moonlit sky. From near its summit a light was flashing—a tiny pin-point of light which shone out at oddly spaced intervals.

"I bet it's a signal to the plane!" declared Jock, his voice cracking.

"Could be Morse," agreed the Major, hoarsely. "This is utterly fantastic!"

Outwardly Sandy remained calm. "That light will be hidden from the village," he pointed out, "by the angle of the cliff. And from the atomic station, too, This is about the only place in the parish it *can* be seen from."

Suddenly the light was absent; and gradually the sound of the aircraft's engine receded and disappeared. "The Atom Chasers" were left gaping up at the distant cliff, surrounded by darkness and silence.

Finally, Sandy said: "This is something even bigger than we thought, sir."

"It is, boy! I'm absolutely flabbergasted!"

"M—maybe there are *two* spies," suggested Willie, "with machine-guns instead of pistols!"

Unfeeling Jock told him to dry up. "What's to be done now?" he asked.

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'Only one thing for it,' replied Major Morrison. 'Continue with our recce of the cave. But we'll have to go carefully.'

It took them ten minutes to reach the flat ground immediately below the cliff. They moved slowly, picking their way among the rocks and heather and trying hard not to make a noise. The moon was well up now, and the tall cliff-face was shimmering in its brilliant light; a ghostly back-drop that might conceal a hundred surprises.

In the shadow at its base they saw the black entrance to the Anchorite's Cave; and when they got to within twenty yards of it they crouched down behind a clump of whin to discuss the situation. They were intensely aware of the eerie quiet. It was so still that the sound of Willie chewing a chocolate to keep his courage up began to get on Jock's nerves.

'Swallow it!' he hissed in his ear. 'Someone might hear you!'

With a gulp like a choking rhinoceros Willie obeyed.

Presently, Major Morrison asked: 'What's the cave like? Far as I remember there's a long funnel going up inside, with steps cut out of the rock.'

'That's right,' said Sandy. 'It leads to a sort of open platform near the top of the cliff-face—where we saw the light coming from. Dad says an Anchorite monk used to sit on that platform meditating on his sins.'

'H'm. If our suspicions are correct there may be somebody up there now, with a lot more sins to answer for than the old monk!'

AT THE ANCHORITE'S CAVE

As they began to crawl in towards the cave an indistinct sound arrested their attention. It was coming from high up on the cliff.

Sandy listened, his tousled red head inclined to one side. 'Like a small dynamo,' he said, at last. 'Maybe to charge the battery for a radio transmitter!'

'But how could they get a dynamo up there?' protested the Major, frowning. 'I mean——'

'You're thinking of the dynamo at the atomic station—a huge big one. But you can get dynamos as small as you like. That doesn't sound much bigger than the one you'd get in a car.'

'How on earth do you boys *know* all this?'

Sandy did his best to be patient. 'Everybody,' he said, 'knows about dynamos nowadays. You have a lot to learn, sir.'

For what seemed an age they lay and listened to the low-pitched throbbing. Then slowly it faded and disappeared, like a dying wind.

'We'd better look out now,' warned Jock. 'Whoever is in there may be coming away.'

And even as he spoke there was movement inside the cave.

'Someone climbing down the funnel of rock,' whispered Sandy.

They lay close to the whin, as still as corpses. Even Willie forgot to snifle. The Major's white moustache puffed in and out, like thistle-down in a delicate breeze.

All at once Sandy gripped his arm. 'There at the entrance—sir—a shadow. And gosh, it's the same

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small man we saw last night at your house!’

It was a moment of tremendous possibilities. But what happened was completely unexpected. The Major and the boys were about to dash forward and surprise the person in the cave when behind them, some twenty yards away, a loud voice grated: ‘Who’s there? Don’t move, whoever you are!’

‘Constable Grant!’ exclaimed Jock, and Willie uttered a strangled wail.

The shadow at the cave-mouth vanished.

‘Blast Grant’s bones!’ groaned Major Morrison. ‘We can’t start explaining things now, or the spy may take fright, and we’ll have no chance of identifying him. Quickly, boys—there’s a glen about fifty yards to the left yonder, filled with hazel-trees. If we reach that we may be able to dodge him.’

They jumped to their feet and began to run.

‘I see you!’ shouted Grant. ‘Stop at once!’

‘I don’t think he’s recognised us,’ muttered the Major. ‘Keep going!’

Grant’s voice, more distant now, came doggedly after them: ‘Trying to evade arrest, are you? I’ll make it hot for you!’

Over rocks and through thick grass they stumbled, running in line abreast. In front was a dark valley, from which sprouted a mass of branches shining like silver.

Suddenly Willie tripped and fell. He tried to get up but failed.

‘Gee—I’ve twisted my ankle!’ he whimpered.

The Major stopped. ‘Here—on my back!’ he ordered. ‘Help him up, Sandy.’

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By the time the operation was complete and they had begun to race once more towards the hazel-glen, they had lost five or six seconds, and Grant had gained thrice that number of yards. His threats came in short, staccato bursts: 'Stop, I'm telling you! It'll be the worse for you if you don't!'

But the laird galloped on gamely at the heels of Sandy and Jock. 'This is the tightest corner I've ever been in!' he gasped to Willie on his back. 'Talk about the Dardanelles!'

CHAPTER VII

The Red-Haired Tinker

BY THE time they reached the glen 'The Atom Chasers' were still some twenty or thirty yards in front of Constable Grant. They rushed in among the shelter of the hazel-trees, slipping and slithering down towards the little burn which could be heard tinkling in the dark.

Among the tangled branches the moonlight was shut out. Sandy spotted a thicket of dry brambles, and into this they plunged and lay as quiet as possible—though Willie, as he slipped off the Major's back, could scarcely conceal a tiny squawk of apprehension. Panting and tense, they listened to the policeman as he crashed down into the glen.

'Where have you got to?' he was shouting. 'By crikey, if I find you you'll be for it!'

But he had lost sight of them, and if he missed the bramble-bushes they had a good chance of escape.

Major Morrison was slowly recovering his breath. He growled: 'Feeling better now, Willie?'

'Yes, sir. My ankle's not nearly so sore.'

'Fine! Just lie still and don't be afraid.'

'Okay. I—I'll eat another sweet.'

'Good idea.'

Constable Grant was casting about some distance

THE RED-HAIRED TINKER

away, making a noise among the hazel-trees like a wandering elephant. Any slight rustle that Willie made as he fished for a chocolate was of no consequence in the general din.

Sandy and Jock were inclined to be scornful of their pursuer's methods; but gradually the sound of his passage came nearer, and their alarm returned. Closer and closer barged the policeman, until they could make out his heavy breathing.

'Steady the Buffs!' muttered Major Morrison. 'Not a move.'

But all of a sudden there was a choking whine.

The laird stiffened. 'What the blazes!'

Willie, it seemed, under the stress of emotion, had swallowed his chocolate the wrong way. Now he was writhing about in a desperate attempt not only to remain silent but also to avoid being choked to death.

'Hold your breath!' groaned Jock. 'Do *something*!'

But Sandy was more practical. He struck Willie a sharp blow between the shoulder-blades, and with a gurgle and a gulp the chocolate took the right turning.

Willie grew silent, but the question was—had the constable heard?

Soon, however, their anxieties were relieved. When only about ten yards away Grant swung off to the right, and slowly but surely the tramp of his heavy footsteps died away in the distance.

'Saved, by George!' exclaimed the Major. 'Saved in the nick of time—in spite of Willie.'

They moved their cramped muscles and stood up.

THE ATOM CHASERS

It was a relief to act normally again, and even Willie began to see life in a rosier glow.

'What's the programme now, sir?' inquired Sandy, removing twigs from his jersey.

'I think we ought to go home. Getting late, you know—and we don't want to invite awkward questions.'

'If our parents ask us where we've been,' said Jock, 'what'll we say?'

'That you were with me—learning scouting. Quite true, isn't it?'

'Right, sir.'

They began to climb out of the glen, still taking care, however, to move quietly.

'Not much use going back to the Anchorite's Cave tonight,' said the Major. 'Too risky in the dark. But tomorrow—in daylight—I'll take some of my men and examine it thoroughly. It's on my own ground—and in any case I have a perfect excuse. Being an archaeologist, my cousin will jump at the chance of a conducted tour.'

The boys congratulated him on the idea.

Obviously pleased, he twirled his moustache. 'Not so useless after all, am I?'

Jock grinned. 'I wonder if you'll find anything special?'

'Remains to be seen. But I'll report to the society tomorrow evening—at seven in the Manse toolshed.'

Willie sniffled. 'T-take care you don't get shot, sir!'

'Ease your mind, boy! I can look after myself. Old campaigner, you know.'

THE RED-HAIRED TINKER

They followed the lip of the glen back down to the village, without meeting anyone. In the shadows behind the Post Office they parted, the Major to visit the hotel, Sandy and Jock to convoy Willie along the short-cut to Strone. All were impatient to discover what the next day would bring.

First of all, unfortunately but inevitably, it brought school for the boys. Sandy and Jock were thankful when the bell went at half-past three, but as the former pointed out there still remained fifty-six hours until Saturday, and fifty-six hours was a long time.

'Old Popeyes was worse than ever this afternoon,' he continued. 'Droning on about the War of Jenkin's Ear—and all the time there's a spy loose in Dun-glass! I wonder how the Major got on at the cave.'

Jock laughed. 'If he found the spy I'm sorry for him! For the spy, I mean!'

'I wish it was time for our meeting. I'm going to start my lessons right away after tea—just to keep myself occupied. It's this waiting that gets you down.'

As they turned from the school track into the main road they saw a man coming towards them—a youngish man with a mop of unkempt red hair. He wore an old blue jersey, a pair of tattered trousers and cracked and broken boots. His rather pale, unshaven face was streaked with dirt.

'Not often you see a tinker nowadays,' whispered Jock. 'And I don't like the look of this one!'

The boys hoped he would let them pass, but they were disappointed.

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As he came abreast he stopped and made a little bow. 'Good day to you, young gentlemen.' The Highland lilt in his voice was cheapened by an ingratiating whine. 'Spare a copper for a poor tinker.'

'Sorry,' replied Sandy, trying to sound like a man of the world. 'We haven't any coppers for ourselves, worse luck!'

'Just a sixpence to buy a wee puckle sugar and tea.'

'Honestly, we haven't a bean. But if you go on into the village you'll probably get tea and sugar from somebody.'

He spat in the dust of the roadside. 'This is my first visit to Dunglass, and it'll be my last. There's no kindness anywhere.'

'You're wrong there,' Sandy hastened to correct him. 'My mother at the Manse never turned away a tinker in her life.'

'Blessings on her, then! But there are others who would spit in your face.'

Jock grew bolder. 'What's your name?' he asked. 'The people we get around here are usually Townsleys.'

'They call me Sween—Donald Sween. From the north, young gentlemen. Ach, it's a hard life, a tinker's. Not even a roof over my head, and the rain will be coming down tonight, I'm thinking.'

'Surely you'll get in somewhere,' said Sandy. 'A barn, maybe.'

'The farmers don't like it—afraid I might set fire to the straw with a cigarette.' Then suddenly he

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grinned, and his face looked less forbidding. 'But last night I found a good place—a shelter at least. The cave in the cliff.'

Sandy glanced quickly at Jock. 'You—you mean the Anchorite's Cave?' he exclaimed.

'That's it. Dry it was—and comfortable enough.'

'Did you spend *all* last night there?'

He nodded. 'From the time it got dark until daylight this morning. I lit a fire on the high ledge to keep myself warm.'

This was a facer, and for a moment the boys were unable to say a word. Finally, however, Sandy recovered his wits.

'You—er—you weren't disturbed at all? By a humming noise, for instance, or by people shouting?'

'The wind was whining in the cliff, making a sound like a machine,' replied the tinker, his voice taking on a strange distant quality. 'But I heard no voices. Now, I must be going. I will beg a meal in the village and then go back to my cave, perhaps. But Dunglass will not be seeing me again, I'm thinking. It's a mean place,' he said, moving on. 'Mean, mean, mean.'

For some time after he had gone the boys stood in the middle of the road, considerably shaken by what they had heard. It seemed as if they had been on the wrong track altogether. The sound in the cliff had nothing to do with a dynamo, and what they had imagined to be a signal to an aircraft had been simply the tinker's fire.

At last they moved across and sat dangling their legs on the roadside wall.

THE ATOM CHASERS

'The Major and Willie are going to be jolly disappointed when we tell them about this,' said Sandy.

'It's sickening,' replied Jock. 'Maybe there's not a spy at all.'

Sandy frowned. 'There *is* a spy. I feel it in my bones. But somehow we don't seem to be getting the right clues.'

'Gosh, I feel as flat as a pancake now.'

'Same here. What's the good of slaving away at school if you haven't something to look forward to at night!'

They wallowed in gloom. Though a wintry sun was shining slantwise across the peaceful fields, glinting here and there on the river in the valley below, it afforded them no comfort. Jock remarked presently that he wished parents knew how much their children had to suffer.

Sandy didn't answer. He was kicking the heels of his brogues against the wall, as if doing his best to destroy them; and his forehead was puckered in a frown of mental concentration.

Suddenly he said: 'Look here—I've been thinking. That was a queer kind of tinker. Even his name was queer.'

'How d'you mean?'

'He didn't speak like a tinker, did he? I mean—it was as if he was *trying* to sound like a tinker. But he didn't use the same *words* as a tinker.'

Elbows propped on grimy knees, chin propped on grimy hands, Jock pondered these statements. 'I believe you're right,' he said, at last. 'And ordinary tinkers don't go on complaining like he did.'

THE RED-HAIRED TINKER

'That's it. Did you notice his hair.'

'Red as carrots.'

'Yes. And thick and smooth, meeting his forehead in a straight line.'

Gloom had vanished. Both were sitting up now, tense with excitement.

'D'you think it's a wig?' breathed Jock.

'I'm not sure. Anyway, he wasn't a bit like the Townsleys, and I bet his story about that cave was all lies!'

They were so intent on discussing this new aspect of the problem that they failed to notice that the sun was dipping behind Dunglass Hill, leaving behind it a dusky half-light. They failed to notice, too, that someone else was coming along the road. It was only when his footsteps became audible on the tar macadam that they looked up quickly and saw Mr. Ingersoll. He seemed to have come from the area of the atomic station and was going towards the village.

'Mind what you say to him, Jock!' whispered Sandy, emerging abruptly from his reflections. 'Queer things are happening, and it's up to us to act as dumb as possible.'

In his prim, yet friendly way he greeted the boys, who observed that his trousers were stained with dry earth. He looked like a bird-watcher, with binoculars and camera slung across his narrow shoulders, and his beard gave him an artistic appearance. Yet there was something in his eyes—a hard and watchful expression—which puzzled Sandy at least.

He asked: 'Got any new bird photos, Mr. Ingersoll?'

'As a matter of fact I haven't been at all fortu-

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nate today. That picture I got of the Rough-Legged Buzzard was a piece of luck, of course.'

'It was jolly good,' said Jock, gravely innocent. 'Sandy showed it to me.'

He looked pleased. 'I was hoping to get another. All this morning I hung about the cliff, but unfortunately, Major Morrison arrived with a party to explore the Anchorite's Cave, so I had to give up the idea. He had his cousin with him—a Miss Cunningham, I believe.'

'She's an archaeologist—writing a book,' said Sandy.

'Quite. A pleasant lady to speak to?'

'Well—I mean, she's all right. Kind of one-track mind, you know. Archaeology all the time.'

Mr. Ingersoll laughed, white teeth gleaming. 'Experts are all the same. Not much small talk outside their own subjects. By the way, did you notice a red-haired tinker on the road just now?'

'We did, 'sir.' Sandy put on a dull and wooden expression in order to hide his interest. 'Donald Sween his name is.'

'Ever seen him in Dunglass before?'

'No. This is his first visit, he said. Jock and I thought he was a bit strange.'

'Strange? How?'

'He didn't sound like a real tinker. Not like the Townsleys, anyway.'

'I see.' Mr. Ingersoll became thoughtful. 'Did he say where he was going?'

'Into the village to beg a meal. He said he spent last night in the Anchorite's Cave.'

THE RED-HAIRED TINKER

The man stiffened, his eyes as bright as steel. 'What! Say that again!' he exclaimed.

'He spent last night in the Anchorite's Cave.'

For a few seconds it appeared as if Mr. Ingersoll was on the verge of an angry outburst. He contained himself, however, and in the end contented himself with saying: 'Well, of course, it's really none of our business *where* he spent the night. Good gracious, I had no idea it was so late! I must be going now. Constable Grant has promised to give me tea and some more hints about local birds. Good-bye, boys. I—er—I shouldn't have anything to do with that tinker, if I were you.'

He went off, moving lightly and quickly as was his habit. The boys watched him until his figure became a blur in the gloaming. Then they jumped off the wall.

'*He's* just about as odd as the tinker!' remarked Sandy.

Jock nodded. 'What puzzles me is how friendly he is with Constable Grant.'

'And how *unfriendly* Constable Grant is with us! Chasing us away from the atomic station if we go within miles of it! Oh, well, it's nearly half-past four. Better get home for tea and Children's Hour. See you at seven, Jock.'

'Okay, Sandy. Seven in the toolshed.'

CHAPTER VIII

Constable Grant Meets His Match

BUT WHEN 'The Atom Chasers' met that evening, with the wind sighing about the toolshed, the Major brought a disappointing report. He and Miss Cunningham, in their visit to the Anchorite's Cave, had discovered nothing. Nothing, that is, except traces of a fire on the high ledge!

'Wood ash and a few warm embers of peat. My gamekeeper climbed up and saw them,' he growled, looking worried and unhappy in the torchlight.

Jock sighed. 'Then it looks as if the tinker *did* spend the night there?'

'Ycs. But I could swear the light we saw wasn't a fire.'

'I agree, sir,' put in Sandy. 'It was flashing, not flickering.'

'And that humming noise wasn't the wind whining—I'm certain of that!' declared Jock. 'Though why Donald Sween should tell a deliberate lie about it I just can't understand.'

After a time Willie chirped up: 'I—I've got something to report to the Society, too.'

'You!' said Major Morrison, sceptically.

CONSTABLE GRANT MEETS HIS MATCH

'Yes, sir. Something that happened when I was going home from school this afternoon.'

'Go on, boy—go on!'

'Well, I—I took the short cut, between the cliff and the atomic station—across the moor, sir. It was daylight, and I had Rover with me—our collie. Sometimes he comes to meet me after school, and we have a grand time trying to catch hares.'

'Hares, boy!' The Major's face grew menacingly red. 'The hares on the moor are *my* hares!'

Willie squirmed on his potato-box. 'Oh, p-please, sir, I never thought! I mean——'

'Oh, all right, all right! Never mind just now. Go on with your story.'

'Well, Rover was racing about as usual when—when all of a sudden he began to scrape and bark. He had found something in a rabbit-hole—a great big piece of cloth, stuffed right down out of sight.'

'What's unusual about that?' said Sandy.

'It—it was silk.' He fished in his pocket. 'Look, here's a bit. I—I'm pretty sure it's part of a parachute.'

This was a sensation indeed. The Major grabbed the piece of material and examined it closely, while the boys crowded in about him like dogs on a warm scent.

'You know, I believe you've struck it!' exclaimed the laird, at last. 'During the last War I had a job in the Ministry of Supply. This is parachute silk all right.'

'It had ropes on, too,' said Willie. 'Long, thin ropes.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

'Well, I'm blessed!'

Presently Jock said: 'What does it mean, sir?'

'Don't ask me!' replied the Major, handing the silk fragment back to Willie. 'Things are getting more and more complicated every minute. But remember the plane we heard last night? Couldn't someone have dropped from it? An accomplice of the spy!'

'Gosh, yes—that's possible,' agreed Sandy. 'If they're planning something really big, *one* spy wouldn't be much good.'

Silence fell as they mused on this intriguing possibility. Intermittently the branch of the big tree outside tapped softly on the roof. But they were accustomed to its antics and paid no heed.

Suddenly, however, they became aware of another sound—the crunch of heavy footsteps on the garden-path beyond the door. Sandy put out his torch, and they held their breaths to listen.

'Your father?' whispered the Major.

'No. He and Mum are out visiting. There's no one in the Manse at all.'

Willie shivered. 'Whoever it is,' he said, 'he's coming nearer!'

Sandy got up and quietly locked the door, for it was important that the existence of their society should remain a secret. This night-prowler could easily be a spy.

They waited in the dark, so motionless that they grew stiff and sore. The footsteps crunched closer and stopped beside the shed. Then the door rattled as someone caught the handle.

CONSTABLE GRANT MEETS HIS MATCH

'Quiet!' breathed Sandy to a shaking Willie. 'Not a sound!'

Again the door rattled, and a voice called: 'Is there anyone in there? Speak up, now!'

In a way, it was a relief to recognise the gruff accents of Constable Grant. But they made no move to welcome him.

It's hard to fool a policeman, however—especially a policeman as suspicious-minded as Grant. 'Don't try to bluff me!' he shouted. 'I saw your light! Come on, now—open up!'

'The Atom Chasers' neither moved nor spoke, though Willie gave a little supersonic squeal, like a mouse in agony.

'All right!' bellowed the constable. 'I'll use my shoulder!'

There was a crash as his sixteen solid stones were thrust against the door. But the lock held. His heavy breathing could be heard, rising and falling like the sea on a rocky shore. And suddenly he launched himself again. This time the lock splintered, and he came stumbling into the shed like some unwilling prehistoric monster.

He switched on his torch. 'Aha!' he panted, pinning 'The Atom Chasers' in its beam. 'It's great what you see at times! So you wouldn't answer, eh?'

The Major stood up, puffing out his moustache in a pose of offended dignity. 'Please explain yourself, Grant! What's the meaning of all this?'

'I might be asking you the same question, Major Morrison!' The reply was sternly calm. 'I happened to be passing on the road and saw a light in here.'

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Knowing that the minister and his wife were out, I came to investigate.'

Sandy shifted his feet. 'Surely I can take my friends to Dad's toolshed if I like?'

'H'm, I suppose you can. But does your father know about it?'

'Look here,' interrupted the Major, 'this inquisition is a bit thick. I mean——'

'I'm not so sure.' Grant rolled on like a river in flood. 'You and these boys have been acting in a highly suspicious manner—wandering about all over the parish, and hiding in here when I come along. Sir Wilfred Steele at the atomic station has been telling me to keep my eyes open for anything suspicious.'

Major Morrison made a sound like an angry bull. 'The boys and I have nothing to do with your confounded atomic station! I'm teaching them the rudiments of scouting, and if we can't proceed on our lawful occasions without being interrupted every minute by blasted policemen——'

'Keep calm, sir—keep calm! I was only doing my duty.'

'Bah! Exceeding it, in my opinion. How are you going to explain to Mr. Campbell the broken door on his toolshed? Tell me that!'

Grant took a deep breath, and it became obvious that he hadn't considered this aspect of the situation. In a moment, while the laird glowered at him, he changed from attack to defence.

'Well, I mean—there *might* have been suspicious characters inside.'

CONSTABLE GRANT MEETS HIS MATCH

Major Morrison followed up his advantage. 'You wouldn't be so bumptious, Grant, if I were to inform the Chief Constable that I found you breaking and entering private premises!'

The other's eyes nearly popped out of his head, while his moustache more than ever resembled that of a bedraggled walrus. 'My goodness!' he stammered. 'You wouldn't do that, sir?'

'It all depends.'

'But—but I had to find out who was *in* the toolshed.'

'Every night you see in an outhouse in Dunglass, do you go barging in—breaking doors and frightening people out of their wits?'

'If I'm suspicious I do.'

'And why, may I ask, are you suspicious of *us*?'

'Well, would you be answering one question, sir? Was it you, by any chance, that ran away from me last night—up at the Anchorite's Cave? ~~You~~ and these boys.'

Sandy and Jock had a simultaneous impulse to clear their throats, while Willie mumbled something incoherent. But the Major, after a moment's pause, gave them an unpleasant surprise.

'I'll be frank with you, Grant,' he said. 'It was us all right.'

'Then—why on earth didn't you stop when I told you?'

The boys had startling visions of a police cell, but they needn't have worried. The Major had all his wits about him.

'For the simple reason,' he replied, 'that we

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thought it would be a good exercise in scouting. Keeping under cover—that sort of thing. In any case, don't you think we proved ourselves quite efficient?'

Grant shook his head, now more in sorrow than in anger. 'There you are!' he explained. 'I've a good mind to put in a report about you!'

But the laird had begun to smile, like the tiger whose head decorated one wall of his study. 'There's always the question of the broken door,' he remarked. 'The burst lock, the splintered woodwork——'

'Now, now, Major Morrison,' interrupted the policeman, 'please don't be jumping to conclusions. I never said I *would* put in a report.'

'H'm, splendid! Then I'll send a man down to repair the door tomorrow. Sandy will tell his father that the wind blew it in.'

'Very well, sir. But you'll have to go carefully all the same. If you're trying to find out things about the atomic station I'll do my best to prevent it. Sir Wilfred Steele gave me special instructions.'

'Trying to find out things! Don't be ridiculous Grant! As a matter of fact I spoke to Sir Wilfred myself today, and he's allowing me to bring the boys to see inside his station tomorrow afternoon.'

Grant sighed like a deflating tyre, while Jock and Willie nudged each other in astonishment and delight.

'Do you really mean it, sir?' exclaimed Sandy. ¶ ¶

'Indeed I do. Stressed the educational side, you know. And if the Constable here is still suspicious] he can come along as well, to keep his eye on us.'

CONSTABLE GRANT MEETS HIS MATCH

But Grant declined the invitation, muttering apologetically that he seemed to have been barking up the wrong tree.

Major Morrison patted his brawny shoulder. 'You certainly have. But in some ways I sympathise. Now then, I'll walk with you to the village. You boys can go home. I'll call for you at the school tomorrow with my car—about half-past three.'

'Thank you very much, sir,' replied Sandy.

Willie wriggled. 'I—I get out at three o'clock,' he said.

'Well, jist hang about, boy. Hang about. Come now, Grant. It's chilly here, with the door hanging open. I'm glad we understand each other now.'

CHAPTER IX

The Missing Container

SIR WILFRED STEELE was tall and thin, with a dark, clean-shaven face which gave him a slightly sinister look. But as the five visitors entered his office he rose from his desk with a smile of welcome.

Major Morrison led the party in. 'Afternoon, Sir Wilfred. Dashed good of you to put up with a lot of sightseers!'

'Not at all. I encourage *bona fide* visitors. After all, this station is public property. Some of our processes are still on the secret list, of course, and these are not shown to everybody.'

He shook hands with Miss Cunningham, who had insisted on coming along. 'Why an archaeologist should be interested in atoms I'm blessed if I know!' remarked the Major.

'Archaeologists are interested in *everything*,' she retorted.

Sandy, Jock and Willie were introduced.

'They've been interested in your station ever since it was built,' said the laird. 'But Constable Grant has kept them as far away from it as possible.'

'Too bad! Though Grant was only doing his duty, really. But don't expect anything too dramatic, boys. You won't see proper atomic bombs, for instance.'

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'Th-thank goodness for that!' squeaked Willie, and everybody laughed.

Locking the door of the office behind him, Sir Wilfred conducted them down a long, white-tiled corridor to the laboratories, where they began their tour of inspection.

The main work of the station, he explained, was the manufacture of isotopes for use in medicine. There was no secret about this, and the boys watched fascinated as the laboratory assistants, in white coats, stood outside the glass-walled cubicles, dealing with the product inside by means of long-handled tongs. In these processes the amount of radiation was very small, but a cumulative effect would be dangerous, and precautions had to be taken.

The Major saw a small cylinder of isotopes being removed from behind the glass and put into a lead container. This was immediately sealed and sent away on a little trolley to the packing department.

'Marvellous show!' he commented. 'D'you mean to tell me that stuff is used a lot in hospitals?'

Sir Wilfred nodded. 'In hospitals all over the world. And for various types of illnesses. In industry, too, it's becoming more and more essential. Isotopes may soon become one of our major exports.'

'And all the result of splitting the atom?'

'Quite.'

At one stage the boys heard a deep humming sound—the sound which had so intrigued them the previous Saturday afternoon as they lay outside the fence in the heather. Sandy asked if it came from a dynamo, and Sir Wilfred confirmed his. They

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generated all their own light and power, it appeared, and the dynamo worked on an automatic system, switching itself on and off as required.

Later on, when Sir Wilfred was explaining the work of the despatch department to Major Morrison, the boys noticed that Miss Cunningham was no longer with them. Nobody, it turned out, had seen her leave.

'We must have been too interested in the isotopes,' said Jock.

Sandy was looking round the high, cool laboratory, with its maze of passages leading outwards. 'But we'd better not try to look for her,' he answered, 'or we might get into trouble.'

Willie agreed. 'We might get lost and—and find ourselves being split up in some machine, like the atoms.'

His friends regarded him with pity. Nevertheless, Sandy decided to follow Sir Wilfred and the Major as they moved to another part of the station. 'Pretend you've noticed nothing,' he told the others. 'But keep your eyes skinned all the same.'

It was getting dusk when they emerged from the experimental laboratory into the main courtyard. The shed where the dynamo operated was built of some dark metal which gave off a faint glow in the half-light. Above them, towering up against the dusky sky, was the cylindrical atomic pile. It had a sinister, threatening look, which was perhaps one reason why the flow of questions put by the visitors came to an abrupt end.

'Must thank you a lot,' boomed the Major. 'Most

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interesting—and instructive, too. You enjoyed it, boys?’

‘You bet!’ replied Sandy. Then he turned to Sir Wilfred. ‘But—er—you didn’t show us the inside of the reactor, sir.’

The scientist smiled.

‘I didn’t—for the simple reason that there’s nothing much to show you. The manufacturing process goes on inside long metal rods, hidden away in the heart of the pile. Most unspectacular, I assure you!’

He went on to invite them across the yard to his office; but as he spoke a shadow came towards them from the main buildings. It was Miss Cunningham, in a state of some excitement.

‘They told me you were out here,’ she exclaimed, breathlessly, ‘but it’s becoming so dark, and I’m so short-sighted, I nearly lost my way!’

‘We’re just going inside for some tea,’ replied Sir Wilfred.

‘Oh, marvellous! I’m simply dying for a cup. I’ve had such an interesting talk with one of your young assistants.’

‘I see.’ He led the way across the tar macadam.

‘I was telling him about a type of green fused sand found by archaeologists in the deserts of Iraq, and he quite agrees that someone may have exploded an atom bomb there—thousands of years ago.’

The Major granted. ‘Sounds a bit far-fetched to me!’

But Sir Wilfred was more polite. ‘I’m not so sure. I’ve heard the theory before—the atom bomb in-

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vented by an ancient civilisation, which wiped itself out with it.' He unlocked the door of his office. 'But come in, all of you. I'll ring for my secretary.'

About an hour later, after driving back in his dilapidated sports car, the boys were sitting comfortably in the Major's study, enjoying glasses of ginger-beer.

'It'll drown the taste of Sir Wilfred's tea!' said their host, putting a measure of his own private liquid into a tumbler and splashing it with soda. 'Won't you have something, Jemima?'

Maintaining a prim expression, Miss Cunningham shook her head. 'I found nothing wrong with the tea,' she remarked.

'It was dreadful stuff!' returned the laird, swallowing loudly and growing red in the face. 'Like all tea made in Government offices. Might have been brewed by some of your ancient Druids, if you ask me!'

'But Geoffrey——'

'Far too much milk and sugar. Like treacle! Waste of the taxpayers' money, that's what it is!'

The boys let the argument flow around them. The angrier the Major got the better they liked it nowadays. They had learnt that his bark was a great deal worse than his bite, and his bursts of gruff indignation, now that they were no longer afraid of him, were thrilling and enjoyable.

'But think of the wonderful work Sir Wilfred and his men are doing!' said Miss Cunningham, plaintively.

Major Morrison hummed and hawed. 'The

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isotopes sound all right,' he conceded. 'But what's going on behind locked doors—tell me that! What villainy are they cooking up in secret——'

In a corner the telephone rang stridently. The laird looked up from his tumbler in surprise, then banged it down on the table. Striding across, he lifted the receiver.

'What. . . Good gracious!' Slowly his expression changed. 'No—personally I can remember nothing at all. But I'll ask the others and ring you back.'

The boys noticed that Miss Cunningham had grown slightly pale. 'Geoffrey, what's the matter?' she cried, as he returned to the table and gulped down the remainder of his drink.

'Dreadful thing—dreadful!' he exclaimed. 'Five minutes ago one of Sir Wilfred's scientist discovered that a container was missing from the secret laboratory. Dangerous material. Highly explosive, he said.'

'Oh, gosh!' moaned Willie. 'We'll all be blown up!'

'Steady, boy—steady! That's not the point at the moment. Sir Wilfred wants to know if we noticed anything odd or unusual this afternoon!'

Sandy and Jock were delighted. Affairs were working out in a manner which exceeded their wildest dreams, and they were right at the heart of the drama. But as the Major spoke they shook their heads.

'Don't any of you remember?' he barked. 'Must say *I* don't.'

Miss Cunningham was clasping and unclasping her hands in her lap. 'Geoffrey,' she said, quietly.

'Yes, Jemima?'

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‘When I was searching for you—after my talk with Sir Wilfred’s assistant—I happened to find myself in the long white corridor leading to his office. Someone was walking away from the door. It was rather dark and shadowy, but I could have sworn it was Mr. Ingersoll, the bird-watcher.’

For a time there was a tight, tense silence. Finally, the Major smoothed his moustache.

‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘I’ll let Sir Wilfred know at once, so that he can communicate with the police.’

As he dialled the number of the atomic station Willie turned to Sandy and Jock. ‘I *thought* there was something queer about that man. He doesn’t know a thing about birds!’

CHAPTER X

Tinker's Warning

IT WAS virtually certain now that a spy was operating in Dunglass. But as to the identity of that spy 'The Atom Chasers' still had no direct evidence, though they could—and did—make a shrewd guess.

That evening, after 'phoning the atomic station, the Major ran the boys back to the village in his more respectable car—a saloon of recent purchase. He stopped near the Post Office, but before his passengers could climb out he said: 'Don't go yet. We must decide on what we're going to do.'

'I—I think we should lie pretty low,' said Willie.

The others made sounds of disgust.

'Poor show, backing out now!' observed the Major, while Sandy inquired acidly if he'd like to resign from the Society.

'No, I—I don't want to resign,' replied Willie urgently. 'Honestly! But gosh, that spy—he's got the container from the lab., and if we don't watch out he'll blow us all up!'

'Rubbish, boy!' The laird's moustache puffed out like a flag. 'It's my idea he intends to destroy part of the station and hold up our research plans. The dynamo, maybe.'

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'That's right,' agreed Jock. '*We're* far too unimportant for a spy to worry about.'

But Willie was prepared to argue. '*We're* the only people who seem to be *doing* anything,' he pointed out.

'H'm, you're right there,' said the Major. 'But now that the container has been stolen someone in authority is bound to take action. Though it's rather curious. When I told him about Ingersoll Sir Wilfred didn't seem at all impressed. Changed the subject, in fact.'

Sandy's brain was whirling. 'You—you don't think the Director himself may be a spy?'

'Impossible! Man of the highest integrity. But full of queer ideas, I must admit. If he doesn't go to the police I will!'

It appeared obvious that 'The Atom Chasers' should concentrate on the strange behaviour of Mr. Ingersoll, and the Major was eager to have a look inside his bedroom at the hotel, where a clue might be found to his real identity. He had a practical suggestion to make.

'We might visit him tomorrow evening. You boys could hold him in conversation in the lounge while I nipped upstairs.'

'Gosh, that's an idea!' said Sandy. 'Just what detectives do in books.'

But Willie was scared they might be found out and unceremoniously murdered. Jock advised him to shut up—and, to everyone's relief, he did.

'I'll 'phone Ingersoll tomorrow morning,' planned the laird. 'Tell him we're thinking of starting a troop

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of scouts and that we require his advice on tracking and camouflage. He says he's a bird-watcher, so as far as we're concerned he ought to be an expert on that kind of thing. You, Willie—you'll have to keep him going about birds, while I make an excuse and go out to investigate his room.'

'You—you won't leave me alone with him?'

'Of course not. Sandy and Jock will be there all the time. In any case think of what you'll be doing for your country, boy! Now then, it's getting late, so you'd better all get home to your lessons. If you don't hear to the contrary, meet me at seven-thirty tomorrow night outside the hotel.'

The following evening after tea, dressed in a plain brown suit and purple tammy, Miss Cunningham paid a visit to the Manse.

Mrs. Campbell left her and the minister alone in the sitting-room and went to darn some of Sandy's stockings upstairs. Her interest in archaeology* was all on the surface ; but she knew that her husband's was deep and scholarly, and it pleased her that someone had come to the parish who could talk to him intelligently on his favourite subject.

Miss Cunningham's main preoccupation, however, seemed to be the legend of the cave. 'I gather it was used in the Middle Ages,' she said, 'by an Anchorite monk who lived there alone.'

'Yes.' Mr. Campbell leaned back in his arm-chair, pressing the tips of his fingers together. 'A man who must have resembled Simon Stylites—perched on a high ledge and meditating on the sins of the world. The natives brought him food and drink, I under-

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stand. They believed that as long as he remained there the district would prosper.'

'Pity that nowadays it should be nothing more than a shelter for tinkers.'

'I have tried several times to get the cave and the Standing Stones taken over as Ancient Monuments. But the authorities just won't listen.'

'More concerned with the atomic station, I should think?'

'Exactly.'

'It is all very sad.' Miss Cunningham sighed. 'Our history, I'm afraid, is being ousted by science. Our culture, too, if it comes to that.'

'I agree. Children are told to build for the future without being given a proper knowledge of the past. By the way, have you discovered any new material for your book?'

'Indeed, I have, Mr. Campbell. The Standing Stones are fascinating——'

There was a polite knock at the door. Looking surprisingly clean, and with his hair slicked down by plenty of water, Sandy came in. He greeted the visitor with a smile.

She responded at once. 'Your father and I are having a most interesting discussion. I hope you mean to join us?'

'I—er—well, I really came to see you, Dad. To—er—to let you know I'm going out.'

'H'm—quarter past seven. Done your homework?'

'Gosh, yes! I've b^een slaving at it since five o'clock.'

TINKER'S WARNING

'I don't know if *slaving* is quite characteristic. But—well, two hours isn't bad, is it, Miss Cunningham?'

'Excellent, in my opinion. You'll be meeting your friends, I suppose—Jock and—er—Willie?'

'Yes. Major Morrison, too. We're going to discuss birds and things with Mr. Ingersoll at the hotel.'

She was obviously taken aback. 'Indeed! Geoffrey didn't tell me,' she remarked, with a puzzled air.

But the minister seemed delighted—and relieved—that his son was due to share such respectable company. 'All right, Sandy, you may go,' he said. 'I hope you have an instructive evening.'

'Thanks, Dad. Good night, Miss Cunningham.'

As the door closed behind him she quickly recovered her amiable calm. 'I only hope he and his friends don't lead my elderly relative astray!' she smiled. 'But I do like the modern generation of boys. So alert and self-confident.'

'Too self-confident in my opinion! But I must say it's very kind of Major Morrison to take such an interest in our young hopefuls.'

'I'm sure the plain truth is that my cousin' has never really grown up himself!'

'Maybe you're right!' Mr. Campbell chuckled. 'But now—you were telling me about the Standing Stones.'

'Yes. So fascinating. This morning I found the altar—facing towards the east, where the morning sun strikes on it directly. I rather think it dates from the earliest Druidical times.'

'Sacrificial, perhaps?'

'Most certainly sacrificial. One can see the runnels

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in the stone, to drain away the blood of the victims.'

And while the archæologists continued their learned but rather gruesome discussion, Sandy was pedalling fast towards the village, his lamp spreading a dancing circle of light on the road in front. He reached the Post Office shortly before the half-hour and parked his bicycle in the yard. Then he hurried down the main street towards the hotel.

As he passed a stone archway leading into a builder's yard a whisper came out of the dark: 'Come here, boy! Come here!'

Sandy stopped short. Beckoning to him from the shadows was Donald Sween, the tinker. His first impulse was to take to his heels. Then he remembered that he had a duty to 'The Atom Chasers'—a duty to discover all possible clues, no matter what the danger.

He moved into the alley. 'What do you want?' he asked.

'The village is quiet tonight. No one should see us here, talking together.'

'But I don't want to talk to you——'

'No one wants to talk to me, because I am poor and hungry, and my clothes are in rags. But even a tinker may be able to help his friends.'

Sandy's fear was leaving him; but the other's whining tone, clearly designed to sound friendly, caused him some bewilderment. 'I—I don't know what you mean,' he said.

'Sandy Campbell, I like you,' replied Donald Sween. 'I liked you from the moment I set eyes on you. Tell me now, where are you going?'

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'That's no business of yours.'

'There you are! I try to help, and my help is thrown back in my face! I think you are going to the hotel—to speak with the man who watches birds.'

'Well, what if I am?'

'Beware of his prim and innocent ways. He is watching more than birds. That is what I waited here to tell you.'

Sandy felt himself shaking. He was cold and puzzled and excited. 'But why?' he exclaimed. 'I mean——'

Donald Sween laid a grimy paw on his arm. 'I am a tinker,' he interrupted, 'of a long line of tinkers. I look into the future as an ordinary man looks into a mirror. He is an evil man, this stranger to Dunglass. And he is plotting evil. Pay no heed to anything he may tell you, for his purpose will be to deceive.'

'If you know all this, why don't you go to the police?'

'The police!' He spat on the cobbles and put his mouth closer to Sandy's ear. 'Listen! Why is the man we have been talking about so intimate and friendly with Constable Grant? Tell me that! No, Sandy Campbell, I am warning you—beware of the bird-watcher, beware of the police! Stay home at nights—that is my advice to you and your young friends.'

'But, gosh——'

'If you don't, evil may come to you. The hand of sorrow may touch your cheek. Now, I must go. Remember—put no trust in the man who watches birds.'

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He moved off like a wraith, sidling along the pavement with his right shoulder almost touching the fronts of the houses. His cracked boots made no sound.

Sandy was left to stare after him, his mind in a turmoil. *What a thing to happen*, he thought. *I'd better not tell Willie about it!* And he was thankful that he had only a few more yards to walk to the hotel.

CHAPTER XI

'The Campbells are Coming'

MR. INGERSOLL received his guests in the warm lounge of the Morrison Arms. During the winter visitors to the parish were few, and they had the place to themselves. They sat round the peat fire, comfortable in body at least. As far as their minds were concerned, it is doubtful if even one in the company was at ease.

Smoking a short briar pipe, the bird-watcher appeared glad to provide the boys and Major Morrison with all the information they required. He spoke at length on camouflage, which he stressed should never be over-elaborate. Birds particularly could be deceived much more readily by a few odd branches than by anything too plainly artificial.

'Camouflage seems to be a kind of double bluff,' said Sandy.

'Exactly,' replied Mr. Ingersoll. 'During the last war Field-Marshal Montgomery camouflaged his desert tanks to *look* like camouflaged tanks—with the result that the enemy ignored them and were taken by surprise.'

'H'm, Monty—came across him once or twice,' remarked the laird. 'Still a young soldier, but doing well!'

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Later on, Willie timidly inquired of Mr. Ingersoll if he'd seen the white blackbird.

'The what?' exclaimed their host, his beard quivering.

'There's a white blackbird flying about the village just now. I—I saw it this morning, on my way to school.'

'That is most interesting!'

Jock had noticed it, too, on the Post Office roof. 'Pure white,' he said, 'But healthy enough.'

It was at this point that the Major began to clear his throat and rise from his chair. The boys stopped talking. This was the big moment, and they all felt a quick thrill of apprehension.

'Er—would you all excuse me for a minute?' said the laird. 'I—er—I want to see the landlord about some coffee.'

'Certainly,' said Mr. Ingersoll.

As he reached the door Major Morrison turned. 'Shan't be a minute, boys. Be back long before you've finished your discussion.'

The door closed. There was an awkward pause before Sandy blurted out: 'Go on, Willie—tell us about the blackbird!'

It was more of a threat than a polite request. Willie swallowed.

'Well—er—it's just an ordinary blackbird, only—well, it's white.'

Sandy glared at him. 'You've told us that already, you dope! Isn't there anything else interesting about it?'

But Willie had come to the end of his conversa-

'THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMING'

tional stamina, and it was Jock who stepped in. 'Have *you* ever seen one, Mr. Ingersoll?'

'Can't say I have. Though I've heard of examples, of course. Probably an albino.'

Sandy knew exactly what an albino was; but here was a perfect opportunity to start Mr. Ingersoll talking again. 'Er—what on earth's that?' he said.

Their host rose to the bait and for the next few minutes he treated them to a highly technical discourse. There were albinos in all species, he explained. Even among humans. Something went wrong with the pigment of the skin, and cells which provided the colour in a bird's feather or an animal's fur simply didn't function.

But when he had finished there was another uncomfortable pause. Jock fidgeted, while Willie sat looking up at Mr. Ingersoll with a fixed smile. He was thinking of what might happen if their scheme failed and this man discovered that the Major was searching his bedroom.

The tension had its effect on Sandy's nerves. 'For goodness sake, Willie,' he exclaimed, at last, 'don't sit there like a dummy! You said you wanted to ask hundreds of questions.'

'I—er—yes, I did. But I've forgotten them.'

'He's kind of shy, sir,' said Jock, coming to the rescue again. 'A bit of a trial to everybody.'

Mr. Ingersoll laughed. 'Most naturalists are shy. I am myself, a little. By the way, would you like to see my album of photographs?'

'Gosh, yes,' said Willie, taking no time for thought. 'That would be great.'

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'Right. I'll go upstairs to my room and get it—'

'No, no!' cried Sandy, leaping to his feet. 'Er—no, just stay where you are, sir.'

The man was taken by surprise. He stood up, looking at them all with an air of puzzled concern.

'Willie doesn't really want to see the photographs,' stammered Jock. 'Er—couldn't you just *tell* us about all the birds you've seen since you came to Dun-glass?'

'I'm afraid that would be a tall order. The most interesting, of course, is the Rough-Legged Buzzard. A beautiful bird. Did I tell you, Willie—I got another photograph of it yesterday. Again near the Anchorite's Cave.'

This time Willie didn't speak. He was all too conscious of the danger in which they stood. But for the life of him he couldn't think how it might be averted. Sandy and Jock were tongue-tied, too, and sweating a little.

'It's in my room,' Mr. Ingersoll continued. 'Look here, I'll go up and get it—and the album as well—'

'There's no hurry, sir,' cut in Sandy, desperately. 'The Major's not back yet, and——'

'I shan't be a second.' Showing signs of impatience the bird-watcher moved towards the door. 'Just make yourselves comfortable by the fire until I get back.'

This was a real crisis; but somehow Sandy found strength to cope with it. Signalling to the others to follow him, he overtook Mr. Ingersoll in the passage

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outside. ‘Er—please, sir, do you mind if we come along with you?’

‘No, of course not, but——’

‘It’s just that—well, we’re not very often in the hotel, and we’d like to see through it.’

Obviously Mr. Ingersoll failed to understand their sudden interest in the geography of the building; but he made no objection as they trailed him upstairs. In Sandy’s mind was a vivid picture of the Major being caught red-handed in the stranger’s room. It was imperative that he should receive some warning of their approach.

He nudged Jock. ‘Go on—you can sing. What about “*The Campbells Are Coming?*”’

Jock saw the point at once; and as they climbed towards the first landing he raised a thin but piercing voice. ‘*The Campbells are coming, oho, oho! The Campbells are coming, oho, oho!*’

The sound echoed back from the panelled walls with anything but a musical effect; and after a moment Mr. Ingersoll stopped to ask plaintively what it was all about.

‘He’s a genius, sir,’ explained Sandy, quickly. ‘It just seems to come over him at times.’

‘He—he sings solos in the church,’ supplied Willie.

Jock continued to give vent with terrible enthusiasm. The song could not fail to be heard in Mr. Ingersoll’s room, even though the door did happen to be shut.

Mr. Ingersoll made a grimace of pain. ‘Surely not “*The Campbells Are Coming?*” In Church, I mean.’

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'Oh—er—that's one he learnt at school,' said Sandy.

As they reached the landing at the top of the stairs Jock stopped. In a merciful silence he complained that he had strained his throat.

'I'm not surprised!' said Mr. Ingersoll. 'Now then, round into the next corridor and my room is second on the right.'

The die was cast. If the Major hadn't understood that Jock's song was an urgent warning to get out and away, things might become extremely serious within the next few seconds. Willie was imagining Mr. Ingersoll whipping out a revolver and shooting them all dead. Spies always shot people dead in the strip-cartoons.

They reached the door. Holding their breaths, the boys watched Mr. Ingersoll take a small key from his pocket and prepare to insert it in the lock. But when he touched it the door swung open.

'That's funny,' he remarked. 'I thought I'd locked it.'

He snapped on the light inside. The boys gaped. Then slowly they began to breathe again, for the room was empty.

What followed was something of an anti-climax. Apparently suspecting nothing, Mr. Ingersoll collected the album and a number of loose photographs from his dressing-table. Then, locking the door of the bedroom behind him, he led the way back to the lounge. There they found the Major, red in the face and slightly breathless but otherwise in control of the situation. He was helping the land-

'THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMIN.'

lord to arrange coffee and sandwiches on a side-table.

About an hour later the boys prepared to leave. They said good night to Mr. Ingersoll and left him sitting by the fire, a small smile quirking one corner of his mouth. Major Morrison, however, accompanied them to the front door. It was the first time they had been alone together since the dramatic interlude in the corridor upstairs.

'It's been a valuable night's work,' said the laird, in a low voice. 'Good show, Jock—singing that song to warr me! I was able to nip down by the back stairs without being seen.'

'Did you find anything in his room, sir?' asked Sandy.

'I did, by George! Something that staggered me a bit!' He frowned and looked back anxiously in the direction of the lounge. 'But I haven't time to tell you about it tonight. You must all go home now, or your parents will be reading the riot act. I want to stay on here and ask this chap a few questions.'

Willie puckered his forehead. 'T-take care of yourself, sir. If he's got the bomb——'

'Don't worry, boy! I'll be all right.'

Jock asked when they'd see him again.

'Tomorrow evening—usual place. And I'll have a lot to tell you. Maybe even the name of the spy!'

Willie's eyes nearly popped out of his head, while Sandy and Jock began to stammer out the appropriate question. But Major Morrison cut them off.

'We've come to a point where the investigation has to be handled with the utmost care. It's a one

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man job—and I know you won't grudge that job to me.'

Sandy gulped. 'No, sir. But couldn't you just tell us——'

'Off you go now—C.O.'s orders! Company commander and troops must obey without question. See you tomorrow evening at seven—unless something unexpected turns up. If it does I'll send you a message. And remember—still not a word to anyone. Good night.'

The boys saw that he was in earnest. They left the hotel with the daunting knowledge that for another twenty-two hours they would have to possess their souls in patience.

CHAPTER XII

The Major Disappears

BUT THE twenty-two hours finally passed, and the boys, worn out by their efforts to concentrate on work at school, met thankfully in the toolshed at seven o'clock. There was, however, no sign of the Major.

At ten past seven he had still not arrived.

'It's not like him,' said Jock, shifting uneasily on his potato-box. 'He's always dead nuts on punctuality.'

Idly fiddling with the switch of his torch, Sandy nodded. 'Remember what he told me last night when I was five minutes late in getting to the hotel? Punctuality is merely good manners!'

'He—he said if he couldn't come he'd let us know, didn't he?' mumbled Willie, chewing a toffee.

'Yes. That's what worries me.'

At twenty past seven their anxiety became acute.

'I hope he's not ill,' said Jock.

'He looked strong enough last night—and as red in the face as ever.' Sandy sounded a good deal calmer than he felt. 'I wonder what he found in Mr. Ingersoll's room?'

'I wish he'd told us. It must have been something pretty important.'

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'What I don't understand is why he wanted to talk to Mr. Ingersoll after we left.'

'There's a lot of things we don't understand!' replied Jock, grimly.

After a time Willie swallowed the last of his coffee. 'It's—it's nearly half-past seven! He'd never be as late as this if everything was okay. What if he's been captured or—or blown up or something?'

Jock advised him to take it easy. Then he said: 'What d'you think, Sandy—should we go to his house and make inquiries?'

'I think we'd better. If he's all right—if he's just been held up—we may meet him on the road.'

They got to their feet, piled their potato-boxes in a corner and left the toolshed. During the day Major Morrison's joiner had repaired the door and it clicked sweetly shut behind them. In the garden it was dark, with a small damp wind from the south. An owl hooted eerily, sending cold shivers down their spines.

As they climbed over the boundary wall and dropped on to the road, Sandy suggested that at this stage Willie ought perhaps to go home.

'Dunglass House is a good bit away,' he said, 'and it might be safer——'

'No—please, Sandy! I'm scared, but I don't want to miss anything.'

'Well, it's your funeral. But try to behave properly, remember. If we get into a tight spot you mustn't panic.'

'Do you think there will be danger?'

'You never know. We're up against somebody

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pretty desperate, and we've got to be prepared for anything.'

'Oh, gee!' sighed Willie, but he followed faithfully as the others set out on their mile-long trudge to Dunglass House.

While they were passing the fir plantation near the old mill he clung tightly to the tail of Sandy's coat; but he betrayed no other sign of nervousness. Indeed, his friends proved even more jumpy than he was. Once, when they saw a wavering light coming in their direction, Sandy led a quick dash into a ditch by the roadside. It was only a farm-labourer, however, going home on his bicycle after a trip to the village; and they got their knees scratched on some bramble canes for nothing.

As they approached the high wall and swaying trees of the Major's house Jock wondered if they ought to go round to the back door. But Sandy scorned this idea. They were neither tradesmen nor tinkers, he said stoutly.

Up the long avenue they went. They reached the wide steps, climbed them slowly and stood outside the massive front door. Sandy pressed the bell-push.

'Maybe he just forgot about the meeting,' said Jock, as they waited.

Sandy shook his head. 'The Major wouldn't forget. He's too keen on finding out who the spy is.'

Footsteps scuffled inside. The door was opened, and Miss Cunningham, spectacles in one hand, peered out at them with a disapproving expression. When she recognised them, however, she permitted herself a little smile.

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'Oh, good evening, boys. This is a surprise!'

Sandy took a deep breath. 'Sorry to trouble you,' he said, 'but—er—could we see Major Morrison?'

'I'm afraid he's not at home.' She looked puzzled. 'Won't you come in?'

'No, thank you. We—we just wanted to speak to him about something.'

'Could I take a message?'

'Well, it was private, really.'

'I see.'

'Do you know where we could find him?'

'You won't find him in Dunglass, Sandy. He went off to Glasgow this morning.'

The boys stared at her. This was a shock, indeed. They felt suddenly helpless and alone, like besieged troops deserted by their commander.

Jock managed to blurt out: 'Gosh, and he never told us!'

Her puzzled look became more pronounced. 'Was there any reason why he should have told you?' she asked.

Jock was about to explain that there was every reason in the world; but he pulled himself together in time. 'No. No reason at all,' he answered, politely.

'He went on business,' Miss Cunningham explained. 'But he didn't tell me any more than that. In fact, I didn't see him myself at all. He went out early and sent a note back from the railway station. A tinker brought it.'

'A tinker!' said Sandy. 'What was his name?'

She smiled and shrugged. 'I just haven't the slightest idea.'

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Momentarily the boys were silent. The news had numbed their brains a little, and they could find no quick answer to the problem which confronted them. They felt as if events were hemming them in, stripping them of their defences. For all they knew Dunglass might be filled with spies, and what—alone as they were—could they do against them now?

Finally, Sandy made an effort to camouflage their true feelings. 'Oh, well,' he said, as lightly as possible, 'thanks very much, Miss Cunningham. We'll just have to wait till he comes back.'

'I suppose so,' she answered. But all at once a memory seemed to come to her. 'By the way, I believe you and my cousin were at the hotel last night—with that bird-watcher man?'

'That's right.'

'Major Morrison came home rather excited, you know. Did he—did he give you boys any reason for his excitement?'

Sandy shook his head. 'We left the hotel quite early. He stayed behind to talk to Mr. Ingersoll.'

'Oh!' she replied, shortly. 'Then that's all right. I'm sorry I can't help you.'

They said good night. The door shut firmly at their heels, and they went down the steps with heavy, reluctant feet. At the front gate they stopped, crowding close to each other in the dark.

'Well, that's torn it!' muttered Sandy. 'I'm jolly well sure the Major wouldn't suddenly go off to Glasgow without telling us.'

'You think something's happened to him?' said Jock.

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'Yes. I feel it in my bones!'

Willie sniffled. 'What on earth are we going to do?'

'I vote we tell the police. Constable Grant, in other words. He's bound to take *some* action if the Major has disappeared.'

'Okay,' agreed Jock. 'Let's run back to the Police Station—part of the way anyway.'

On their speedy journey to the village Willie managed to keep up with his friends. But only just. He was panting when they reached the small cottage with the blue lamp, and though it was a cold evening sweat ran down the back of his neck.

Constable Grant was at home and invited them into his office. It was cold and bleak, with a high desk and hard wooden chairs and benches. Echoes whispered in the tin roof. The boys refused to sit down and began at once to tell their sensational story. Words came tumbling out.

But after a few minutes Grant held up his hand. '*Chiall beannachd mi!*' he exclaimed in the Gaelic. 'What on earth are you all talking about? Coming here at nine o'clock at night with a cock and bull story——'

'It's not a cock and bull story!' retorted Sandy, with some heat. 'Major Morrison's disappeared.'

Grant frowned, leaning forward against the desk like a statue of disgust. 'That's a lot of rubbish! Didn't Miss Cunningham tell you he'd gone to Glasgow?'

'Yes,' squeaked Willie. 'But he wouldn't have gone to Glasgow without telling *us*!'

'Huh! If you ask me, it's time you were all at home

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and in bed. Especially you, Willie Niven—at your age! You’ve been reading far too many of these trashy novels.’

Sandy took a step forward. ‘Please listen, Constable Grant! Haven’t you heard about the container of explosive that’s gone missing from the atomic station?’

‘Well, maybe I have, but——’

‘Don’t you see, there’s a spy at work! Major Morrison was on his trail. Last night at the hotel he told us he might even be able to tell us who that spy is. And today he disappears!’

The policeman shook a balding head. ‘Goodness gracious, what next! I’m not denying there may be a few suspicious characters about, but as far as the Major is concerned you’re letting your imagination get the better of you.’

‘We’re not—honestly! The tinker warned me about Mr. Ingersoll——’

‘The tinker!’ said Grant, suddenly alert. ‘What tinker?’

‘Donald Sween. Don’t you know him?’

‘Somebody mentioned him yesterday, but I haven’t seen him myself. What did he tell you, Sandy?’

‘He said to beware of Mr. Ingersoll, and—and of the police, too!’

‘Well, well—that’s a cool one, if you like!’ He smoothed his drooping moustache, and the creases in his forehead betrayed deep and anxious thoughts. ‘I must have a word with him, as soon as possible.’

Impatiently Sandy cut in: ‘But why worry about a

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tinker when you ought to be looking for Major Morrison?’

‘Now, now, that’ll be enough, Sandy Campbell! Nobody is going to tell me how to do my job.’

‘Don’t you—don’t you *believe* there’s a spy?’

‘Even if I did, I wouldn’t be discussing it with a lot of foolish boys.’

‘But there was that foreign radio valve, and the light in the cliff, and the parachute in the rabbit-hole——’

Again Grant’s expression changed. ‘What do you know about a parachute?’ he said, sharply.

‘Willie’s dog found it,’ explained Jock. ‘Up on the moor near the Anchorite’s Cave.’

‘Is that a fact?’

‘Yes, it’s a fact. And then the container of explosive went missing, and now Major Morrison——’

‘Major Morrison has gone to Glasgow.’ With an effort the policeman regained his calm stolidity. ‘Miss Cunningham told you. Now, off you go and leave me in peace, for goodness’ sake! If you come bothering me again I’ll speak to your fathers, and then you’ll be in plenty of trouble!’

Sandy was thoroughly exasperated. ‘Surely you don’t think we’re telling lies?’ he said.

‘I think you’re talking a lot of nonsense,’ replied Grant heavily. ‘Take my advice and don’t go meddling in things you don’t understand, or it’ll be the worse for you.’

‘Oh, all right!’ With a hopeless look Sandy moved away. ‘Come on, chaps.’

For the first time that evening Constable Grant

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smiled. Holding open the door, he patted Sandy's shoulder. 'That's better. It's for your own good I'm telling you. Good night, now. And mind you go straight home.'

Outside again, on the damp pavement, Jock uttered a groan. 'And he calls himself a policeman!' he exclaimed bitterly.

'You might as well knock your head against a stone wall!' agreed Sandy.

Willie imitated the frowns of his friends. 'If you ask me,' he said, 'nobody's going to believe our story—just because we're kids.'

Sandy nodded. 'You're quite right. And in that case there's only one thing to do. We must try to find the Major ourselves.'

CHAPTER XIII

The Trap

WILLIE showed no enthusiasm for this noble resolve. 'But how?' he inquired, as they walked along the main street of the village.

'Remember that first night,' said Sandy, 'when we followed the two men from the atom station to Major Morrison's house and Jock and I fell through the glass roof? Well, the Major complained to Dad that the night before someone was inside his greenhouse and left the door open. I bet it was the spy.'

'You mean he may have been meeting someone?' said Jock.

'Yes. Or perhaps operating his radio transmitter. He must have been on his way there the night we followed him, only we frightened him away when we fell.'

Jock and Willie whistled. Such an idea had never before occurred to them; but now they realised it had immense dramatic possibilities.

Sandy went on: 'Okay—listen! The next night he took his transmitter to the Anchorite's Cave, but once more he was frightened—when Constable Grant started shouting after us. I bet he's now doing his work in the greenhouse again. If he's taken Major Morrison prisoner he'll feel quite safe

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there with only Miss Cunningham in the house.'

'By golly!' exclaimed Jock, his humble tribute to this masterly analysis of the situation. Willie was speechless.

'I vote we go back to Dunglass House now,' said Sandy, 'and investigate the greenhouse.'

This scheme found immediate support from Jock; but Willie pointed out that it was nearly ten o'clock and that he'd get into an awful row if he was late.

'Never mind,' returned Sandy. 'Every minute counts if we're going to find the Major. And think of the reward if we catch the spy!'

'As long as he doesn't catch us——'

'Oh, don't be soppy! Come on.'

Luckily the night was fine after a dull and misty day. Continuous trudging back and forth between the Manse, Dunglass House and the village might have been a bit of a bore on an ordinary occasion; but excitement kept the boys from feeling tired. Jock's bicycle had a puncture, while Willie had left his at home. Otherwise they might have done their journeys more quickly. But they were so eagerly on the trail that lack of transport didn't worry them.

Once inside the grounds of the Major's house they approached their objective with caution. But all was quiet, and finally Sandy volunteered to try the greenhouse door. It was locked. Undaunted, he switched on his torch and directed its beam through the glass of one wall. Inside he could see nothing but an assortment of potted plants.

That didn't mean, of course, that the place wasn't being used by the spy and his accomplice—if he had

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an accomplice. The boys retired to a thicket of rhododendrons from which they had a close view of the door, and settled down to watch and await developments.

It was quiet, except for the whisper of a light wind among the trees; but the darkness was relieved by a high curtain of stars. The house itself was a dull, black mass, with no light anywhere as far as the boys could see. Nothing moved in the grounds.

At first they were warm and comfortable enough, after their physical exertions; but as time went on they began to feel the cold. The stars, too, were slowly blotted out as a great black cloud moved up from the south.

'Sandy,' whispered Willie.

'What is it?'

'I—I felt a spit of rain.'

'Well, why worry? You won't melt.'

'If I get wet Mum will make a terrible row. She says I have a weak chest.'

'And *have* you a weak chest?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, that's okay. Your Mum's not so important as Major Morrison—not at the moment, anyway.'

Jock sighed, picking a brittle rhododendron leaf out of one ear. 'What an outlook!' he muttered. 'Worrying about his chest when the spy may be torturing the poor Major!'

'Gosh, I never meant that!' said Willie. 'It's just that my Mum——'

'Oh, here's a toffee!' interrupted Sandy. 'Suck it and for goodness' sake keep quiet. We'll have to be

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pretty careful in case someone does come to the greenhouse.'

But after another twenty minutes everything was as quiet as before, and the boys were finding their vigil a test of both courage and stamina.

Then, quite suddenly, as a slight shower of rain eased off, they heard footsteps on the drive. Sandy gripped Willie's arm to keep him quiet. Jock stared steadily out from among the branches, straining his eyes to defeat the dark.

But it was only a shadow that they saw approaching the greenhouse door, unlocking it and going in.

Sandy was about to remark on the absence of any light, when more footsteps were heard. Another dark shadow—bigger this time and apparently carrying a haversack—entered the greenhouse to join the other. As the boys listened they made out a faint murmur of conversation inside, followed by the sound of someone whistling 'Pedro the Fisher man.'

Seconds ticked past. The boys found their muscles becoming more and more cramped. They wished they could understand what was going on in the greenhouse; but all they could do was wait in patience for something definite to happen.

And all at once they realised that something definite *was* happening. High overhead, and gradually coming closer, was the drone of an engine.

'A—a plane!' squeaked Willie. 'Like the night at the Anchorite's Cave!'

Sandy hissed him into silence. Inside the green-

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house could be heard a quick rattling noise. Near the lower branches of a big elm which grew above it appeared a flashing light. It came to them that the spies were signalling to the plane with a lamp—through the glass roof of the greenhouse.

They watched and listened, fascinated. Here was direct evidence that Sandy's theory was correct. Now all that remained for them to do was to identify the people working the lamp.

But this was easier said than done. The spies were grown up and probably armed—more than a match for three boys. A showdown now would probably end in disaster for 'The Atom Chasers' and extinguish any hope of rescue for the Major. Their best plan, it appeared obvious, was still to wait and see.

The plane droned away and the flashing stopped. The boys lay tense. Then the greenhouse door opened. The two shadows emerged, and there was a click as 'one of them, quietly whistling 'Pedro the Fisherman,' locked the door.

The figures were unrecognisable in the dim starlight, though one was clearly taller than the other. But they were talking to each other—one voice deep, the other high-pitched—and the words of one speaker at least were just distinguishable.

The whistler broke off and said: 'Our last message, thank heaven! Let's get it straight. We plant the explosive at two o'clock in the morning, when the second lot of night-watchman are taking over and they're off their guard?'

There was a murmur from the other which the

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boys didn't catch. The deep voice continued: 'I know—under the cowling of the dynamo. I have the drawing you made.'

Again an indistinct murmur, to which the deep voice replied: 'Oh, he's safe enough. No one will go near the Anchorite's Cave tonight. The boys? Oh, they don't count. Come—we have a lot to do before two o'clock.'

The sound of footsteps on the gravel died away, leaving the boys alone with the rustle of the night wind in the trees.

'Golly, did you hear?' whispered Sandy, crawling out of the rhododendrons.

'I bet it was the Major they were talking about,' said Jock. 'They've got him a prisoner in the Anchorite's Cave!'

Willie was shaking with cold and apprehension. 'And they're going to blow up the dynamo in the atom station! With the stuff in the container that went missing, I expect.'

'Yes—at two in the morning,' agreed Sandy. 'Just about three hours from now. Did you recognise the voices, Jock?'

'One of them I couldn't make out. The other was—familiar somehow.'

'That's what I thought. But I couldn't place it. Now then, what are we going to do?'

Jock's idea was that they should make a bee-line for the Anchorite's Cave to look for the Major. But Sandy pointed out that if after all the Major *wasn't* there—as was quite possible—they'd have wasted more than an hour of valuable time.

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'I think we ought first to warn Sir Wilfred Steele,' he said.

'What if he doesn't believe us?' returned Willie. 'Same as Constable Grant.'

'He's just got to believe us! Come on—we'll tell Miss Cunningham in the house here. She may 'phone to Sir Wilfred for us—and if she does he's bound to listen to *her*.'

'Gosh, yes!' exclaimed Jock. 'I never thought of that. She'll get a shock when she hears what's been happening in the greenhouse!'

They ran across the lawn towards the front door. When they had mounted the steps Jock pressed the bell.

'I hope she hasn't gone to bed,' said Willie.

Sandy didn't think so. 'There's a light on in the library now. She'll be working on her book, I expect.'

Quite suddenly the door was opened. Framed in bright light, Miss Cunningham regarded them with a surprised and even startled air.

'Good gracious, what are you boys doing here?'

'Please could we speak to you,' said Sandy, 'and use your 'phone?'

She frowned. 'Quite impossible. At this time of night I——'

'But it's about Major Morrison. We think we know where he is!'

'What!'

Willie gulped. 'And they're g-going to blow up the atom station!' he stammered.

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Abruptly she became very calm and efficient. 'Indeed! This is most interesting. Won't you come in?'

They trooped into the hall, while she carefully closed the door.

'Gosh, thanks,' said Sandy. 'You've no idea what's been going on!'

'Evidently not,' she smiled, leading the way into the library and making them sit down by the fire. 'Now, Sandy, tell me what it's all about.'

'There's a spy, Miss Cunningham. We suspected there *was* a spy—and so did Major Morrison—but we weren't sure until tonight.'

'Go on.'

'Two people came to the greenhouse out there. One must be the spy, the other his accomplice. They signalled to a plane—with an Aldis lamp, I think. Then we heard them talking. Major Morrison must have found out something. They've made him a prisoner—we *think* in the Anchorite's Cave. And at two o'clock in the morning they're going to put an explosive under the dynamo at the tom station and blow it up.'

'You—er—I take it you didn't recognise them?'

'It was too dark,' returned Sandy. 'But we're pretty sure we've heard one of the voices before.'

'A man's voice?'

'Yes. But that doesn't really matter, does it? The important thing is to warn Sir Wilfred Steele. Could you please 'phone and tell him?'

She had grown tense and a little pale. 'Wouldn't it be better if you talked to him yourselves?'

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'Okay—I mean, very well, Miss Cunningham. Though he might listen more carefully if it came from you.'

'Oh, I don't think so.' She got up, smoothed her iron-grey hair. 'Come and I'll show you where the telephone is—in a small room upstairs.'

As they reached the hall and began to climb the main staircase Jock said: 'The—the telephone was in the study two days ago.'

She smiled back at him. 'Aren't you observant! The fact is, Major Morrison said it annoyed him, so he had it transferred.'

She took them up a small, steep turret stair, dark and musty. As they reached the narrow landing the boys suddenly stopped. Sandy's hair crawled at the back of his neck. Downstairs someone was whistling, and the tune was 'Pedro the Fisherman.'

Miss Cunningham said quietly: 'What's the matter?'

'We heard that tune tonight already,' Sandy told her. 'The man whose voice was so familiar——'

Willie butted in, desperately: 'He—he's coming upstairs—after us!'

'Don't be ridiculous!' retorted Miss Cunningham, adding in a loud voice: 'There's no one whistling—not *inside* the house.'

Downstairs there was silence again.

'Hurry up—you must get on the telephone to Sir Wilfred as soon as possible.' She opened a door on the left side of the landing and stood on the threshold, beckoning them in.

As they went past her she switched on the light.

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They saw a small bare attic, uncarpeted and quite empty.

'But there's no telephone!' exclaimed Sandy. I——'

There was a sound behind them. Wheeling round, they saw Donald Sween beside Miss Cunningham at the door. But he had lost the tattered look of a tinker, and his voice was no longer a bitter whine.

'I told you, young Sandy! I warned you to stay home at nights! And now, as I promised, evil has come to you.'

'It—it was you who was whistling?'

'Yes Pity you should have seen Miss Cunningham and myself tonight.'

The boys understood at last. Miss Cunningham was the spy—Donald Sween her accomplice. But ironically, in the very moment of discovery, they were trapped.

Sandy made a dash for the door, arms flailing. But the man caught him by the scruff of the neck and contemptuously flung him back into the attic, where he fell between Jock and Willic.

'You—you traitors!' he gasped.

'Hardly that,' smiled Donald Sween. 'We owe allegiance to another country. Well, Hild.—in spite of everything no harm has been done. It was clever of you to get them up here.'

'You nearly spoilt it all by that irritating habit of yours!'

'All's well that ends well. We can now lock the door and leave them. By the time they are found we'll have finished the job and be safely on our way.'

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'I hope so.' She no longer appeared as a harmless 'blue-stockings' but rather as a grim and forceful leader. 'Have you fixed the detonator?'

'Not quite. But another few minutes should do it. Good night, boys. I'm afraid the room's not too comfortable, but it's the best we can do. Oh, and by the way, there's no point in shouting for help. The house is empty.'

'You rotten spies!' said Sandy, getting to his feet.

'Listen carefully at a few minutes past two,' Miss Cunningham advised them, as she closed the door. 'You may hear the explosion.'

The key turned in the lock.

CHAPTER XIV

The Truth about Mr. Ingersoll

‘WE—we’re finished now!’ sniffled Willie, as the spies’ footsteps died away on the stairs.

‘How d’you mean finished?’ demanded Jock, irritably.

‘Well, there’s nothing in the room except a skylight window—and that’s got iron bars across it.’

‘You’re not much help, I must say!’

Sandy said nothing. They had walked straight into a trap, and he had no idea how they might get out of it.

He looked round the room. There was no furniture, no fireplace or chimney. The walls were discoloured a dull yellow. The floor was of smooth white wood. The line of the sloping ceiling was broken only by the skylight. A naked electric bulb hanging close to it showed protective iron bars outside the glass.

As far as he could see there was no opportunity of escape whatsoever. And it was desperately important that they should escape within the next two hours. If they didn’t, then the spies would have succeeded in their mission. The atomic station would be put out of action for months, and British research would suffer in comparison with that of other countries.

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'Wh-what on earth are we going to do?' said Willie.

Sandy glared at him. 'If you ask that question again I'll scrag you!' he promised. 'Give us time to think.'

'But it's nearly midnight. My Mum will be getting anxious.'

'So will Jock's. So will mine. And the worst of it is, Dad won't be home till nearly one o'clock in the morning. He had to go to a Presbytery Meeting. But we just can't help it. Come on, let's sit down in the corner here and try to use our brains.'

'That's right,' muttered Jock. 'This is what you'd call a crisis.'

Mrs. Campbell, Sandy's mother, was at that moment alone in the Manse, conscious also of a crisis. She watched the hands of the clock turning towards midnight, and as each minute passed, with still no news of her son, she grew more and more anxious.

At five to twelve she could contain herself no longer. She went to the 'phone and dialled a number.

'Police Station? . . . Oh, Constable Grant, I'm so worried! Sandy has never come home. . . . Yes, he went out quite early—about half-past seven—to meet his friends, Jock Galbraith and Willie Niven. . . . You did! Oh dear—what can have happened? . . . No, my husband won't be home for some time. He's in town—at a Presbytery Meeting. . . . Good! You'll let me know at once if you have any news? Thank you. . . . Yes, I'll try not to worry. Good-bye.'

At the other end Constable Grant put down the

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receiver and thoughtfully stroked his moustache. He left the office and returned to his own private sitting-room, where Mr. Ingersoll was waiting.

'Well,' he remarked to his guest, '*there's* a mystery if you like!'

'There always seems to be a mystery when I drop in for a chat!' The bird-watcher grinned, flicking ash from a cigarette. 'What is it this time?'

'Mrs. Campbell from the Manse—her son hasn't come home yet. And I'm just after hearing from Mrs. Galbraith and Mrs. Niven. Their sons haven't come home either.'

'That's odd. It's pretty late.' Mr. Ingersoll was dressed carelessly in his usual windcheater and corduroys; but there was an alertness about his eyes which would have puzzled the boys had they been present to notice it.

Constable Grant sat down heavily and poured out two more cups of tea. 'There's something queer going on!' he grumbled.

'How d'you mean?'

'Well, Sandy and Jock and Willie came here about nine o'clock, with some cock and bull story about a spy.'

'A spy?'

'Mphm—but it was just their imagination! At the same time——'

'What exactly did they tell you?'

'Och, it was all nonsense! Major Morrison has gone away to Glasgow on business, but they don't believe it. They say he's been taken prisoner by the spy.'

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'It's possible,' said Mr. Ingersoll.

Grant stared at him. 'Eh? Don't tell me *you're* taking it serious?'

'That's as may be.' There was a curious ring to the quiet prim voice. 'What else did they tell you?'

For a moment the policeman was so surprised at the change in his friend that he could hardly speak. But he recognised the voice of authority when he heard it, and after a bout of nervous throat-clearing he went on: 'Well, they told me that yon container of explosive that went missing is going to be used to blow up the atomic station. Such rubbish!'

'I see. So you sent them away?'

'Of course. Sir Wilfred Steele asked me to keep an eye on things, but it's not my job to be listening to a lot of childish tales. They're nice boys, mind you, but——'

'Did they mention any names? I mean, had they a clue to the identity of the spy?'

'The only names they mentioned were a tinker's—and your own. This tinker that's been going about—Donald Sween he calls himself—Sandy said he's not like an ordinary tinker at all.'

'Indeed! And how did my name come into it?'

'Donald Sween told Sandy to beware of Mr. Ingersoll—and of the police, too. Did you ever hear anything like it?'

'Never.' Mr. Ingersoll's eyes were as keen and cold as ice. 'But you've been making a bad mistake, you know. Those boys were telling you the truth!'

Grant had been taking a sip of tea. Now he put his cup down with a clatter. 'What are you saying?'

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he spluttered. 'And what right have you——

But the other was already on his feet. 'No time for explanations just now,' he said. 'We've got to find Sandy and his friends.'

In spite of certain doubts and fears, Grant also got up from the table. 'Yes, but—but how?'

'I've got an idea. Come on—here's hoping we're not too late!'

'Chiall beannachd mi!' sighed the policeman, reaching for his tunic. 'What next?'

In the attic at Dunglass House the boys were becoming more and more dispirited. Willie kept looking at his watch as the time crept on to one o'clock. They had shouted until they were hoarse, but it was clear that as Donald Sween had said the house was empty. And it was in such a lonely situation, off the main road and surrounded by trees, that no one was likely to come near it at night.

'That's the trouble,' said Sandy. 'It's lonely situation, I mean. I thought we might start switching the light off and on as a kind of signal—shining up through the skylight. But I don't suppose anyone would see it.'

'You never know,' returned Jock. 'We ought to try it anyway.'

'Okay.' Sandy got up stiffly and crossed to the switch at the door. 'But it's a forlorn hope, in my opinion.'

The others scrambled up, too, and stood beside him. 'Gosh,' said Jock, 'I never saw you in such a hopeless mood before!'

'No wonder! Finding out who the spy is and

THE ATOM CHASERS

everything—and now we can't do a thing about it. I bet the Major's feeling just the same, wherever he is.'

'Poor old Major!' whispered Willie, on the verge of tears.

'Here goes, then.' Sandy began to manipulate the switch. 'Three short, three long, three short—that's SOS, isn't it? We'll take turns at this—and keep on all night if necessary. It's the best we can do.'

'I've got my fingers crossed,' said Willie. 'On both hands!'

Meanwhile, Mr. Ingersoll and Grant were pedalling fast towards Dunglass House, the constable on his own bicycle, the bird-watcher on a spare one always kept at the Police Station. When they reached the front gate they dismounted and parked their machines behind one of the high stone pillars. Then, slowly and with some caution, they began to walk up the drive. Half-way along, Mr. Ingersoll motioned to his companion to take cover behind a clump of rhododendrons. For a few minutes they stood there quietly, watching the house.

'Och, we're wasting our time,' said Grant, at last. 'There's not a sign of life, and it's as cold as charity out here among the trees.'

'I'm wondering about Miss Cunningham,' replied Mr. Ingersoll.

The policeman made a strangled sound. 'Why in the world should you be wondering about Miss Cunningham—a decent kind of woman, by all accounts, even though she is an archaeologist? In any case, what has all this got to do with you?'

THE TRUTH ABOUT MR. INGERSOLL

'Look here, Grant—I might as well tell you.' Mr. Ingersoll's voice had become authoritative again. 'I'm not a bird-watcher. I was sent here by M.I. 5 to investigate a spy scare. It's more than a scare, it seems.'

'A—a secret service man?'

'Yes.' He took a small leather folder from his pocket and flicked it with the light of his torch. 'Here's my proof.'

'Mercy upon us!' exclaimed the policeman, torn between awe and offended dignity. 'Why wasn't I told?'

'Gladly, my friend. No need to upset the local population—that is, if nothing came of my inquiries.'

'But something *has* come of them?'

In the rustling dark Mr. Ingersoll tried to make amends for his former secrecy. 'Sir Wilfred Steele knows about me, of course, and my role as a bird-watcher gave me a chance to keep watch on the station. Last Monday night I saw someone slipping out through the fence. I followed this person, who led me to Major Morrison's house. But just as we entered the grounds the two boys fell through the roof of the greenhouse, and of course the person disappeared. I had to disappear as well!'

'My goodness! So that's why you've been wondering about Miss Cunningham?'

'Not only that. The Major told me she was his distant cousin, but when I heard he hadn't actually seen her since she was a girl I made inquiries through the C.I.D. and discovered that the real Miss Cunningham died in Edinburgh some years ago.'

THE ATOM CHASERS

'Gracious me—what a business!'

'The day she and Major Morrison and the boys visited the station she had plenty of opportunity to steal the container. I tried to keep an eye on her but saw nothing.'

Grant swallowed. Mentally he was floundering far out of his depth. 'And what about this story the boys were telling me—about an aeroplane, and a light at the Anchorite's Cave, and a sound they heard inside?'

'I think an accomplice was dropped from a plane by parachute—an expert on explosives, probably.'

'The tinker? Donald Sween?'

'Yes. Miss Cunningham said she was an archaeologist. She could be seen pottering about near the Anchorite's Cave without arousing suspicions. She may have sent messages from there to a foreign plane—probably both by lamp and radio—to let her accomplice know when he should join her. They'll signal to the plane again when they're ready to leave.'

'Bless my soul!' Grant was seeing some light in the dark tunnel down which he had been led; but he was still finding it difficult to utter words suitable to the occasion.

'I've no definite proof, of course,' Mr. Ingersoll went on, 'but the boys may be able to supply it. That's why we must find them as soon as possible.'

'I can scarcely believe it all!' Grant sounded as if the world's end was imminent. 'In Dunglass, of all places! Do you think the Major found out something and was taken prisoner to keep him quiet?'

THE TRUTH ABOUT MR. INGERSOLL

'That must be it. That night at the hotel he was in a strange mood. After the boys left he kept questioning me—about his own relative, Miss Cunningham. I don't know why.'

Grant understood at last why the secret service man was so keen to investigate Dunglass House. But as far as he could see the dark, quiet building promised to reveal no concrete evidence.

On Mr. Ingersoll's suggestion, however, they decided to make a reconnaissance of the premises at the back. And suddenly, as they circled one corner of the house, they saw the black outline of a turret against the sky.

In the roof of the turret a light was flashing.

CHAPTER XV

Rescue Party

THE LIGHT was obviously coming up through a skylight.

'It's a regular pattern,' said Constable Grant, excitedly. 'Do you not see?'

'Quite right!' Mr. Ingersoll stood in the shadow of Major Morrison's garage, looking up. 'Wait a minute—three short, three long, three short. It's SOS, Grant!'

'My goodness!'

'Warrant or no warrant, we'll have to get into this house right away!'

They ran back towards the front.

'What if we're making a terrible mistake?' panted the policeman.

'We must risk it.'

As Mr. Ingersoll took out a bunch of skeleton keys and began work on the lock of the front door, his companion wiped a damp forehead. 'Never in all my life,' he muttered, 'has anything like this happened to me!'

In the attic in the turret Sandy came to the end of yet another five-minute spell of working the switch and handed over to Jock. He rubbed his wrist, which had become tired and sore.

RESCUE PARTY

Willie sighed. 'Gosh, I'm awful hungry,' he complained. 'My tummy's so empty it's started rumbling.'

Exasperated, Sandy turned on him. 'Shut up, can't you! If it's not your chest you're worrying about, it's your tummy!'

'Well, it's nearly half-past one, and I haven't had anything to eat since tea-time.'

'Neither have we, you dope! I——'

He broke off as a door banged faintly, downstairs. Jock stopped signalling, and they stood quiet to listen.

Suddenly Sandy became alert. 'There's someone moving about in the hall. Let's start shouting again.'

'Wh-what if it's Miss Cunningham--and the tinker?' said Willie.

'If it is they just won't pay any attention. But they should have gone off to the station long ago. Right now—altogether!'

They yelled. They thumped on the door, with such enthusiasm that some plaster fell from the ceiling. As they stopped for breath quick foot steps could be heard on the turret stairs. Once more they banged and shouted.

Then they stood back. The lock turned, the door opened, and there stood Mr. Ingersoll and Constable Grant.

'Gosh!' exclaimed Sandy and Jock in unison. Willie was unable to comment.

'We saw your light,' said Mr. Ingersoll. 'Tell us quickly—did Miss Cunningham lock you in here?'

THE ATOM CHASERS

'Yes—she's the spy,' returned Sandy, in a breath. 'And that tinker—he must have landed by parachute. We saw them in the greenhouse signalling to a plane. Then we heard them say they were going to blow up the dynamo at the atom station at two o'clock this morning!'

'Two o'clock!' Mr. Ingersoll glanced at his wrist-watch. 'It's half-past one now!'

'And we think Major Morrison is a prisoner in the Anchorite's Cave. We told Constable Grant tonight already.'

The policeman showed signs of mortification. 'I'm sorry, boys, I never thought,' he began; but the other cut him short.

'No time for apologies. We must get in touch with Sir Wilfred Steele, then try to find Major Morrison. Where's the 'phone in this house?'

'In the study.'

'Come on, then. I'll 'phone Sir Wilfred at once.'

Quickly he led the way downstairs; then Sandy showed him the way to the study. As he lifted the receiver and started to dial he looked up with a sudden expression of dismay.

'It's dead. They must have cut the lines! This means we'll have to get to the atomic station ourselves. Can we do it in time?'

'The Major's old sports car.' Grant was puffing in his eagerness. 'I noticed it in the garage as we came in.'

'Good! That ought to give us time to stop at the Anchorite's Cave and pick up Major Morrison if he's there.'

RESCUE PARTY

They raced out through the front door and round to the garage. The big saloon was gone, but at the back, facing outwards, was the ancient car which was the Major's pet and delight.

Mr. Ingersoll jumped into the driving-seat, switched on the ignition and pressed the starter. With a roar the engine burst into life. Sandy climbed in beside him at the front, while Constable Grant Jock and Willie piled into the back.

Headlights dipping and swaying they rattled down the drive and out on to the main road. Almost immediately they swung right on to the moorland track. The car leaned and bucked, like a small boat in a storm; but no one minded the discomfort.

Presently the sandstone cliff loomed up against the stars in front, and before long the headlights were picking out small bushes clinging precariously to its perpendicular surface. The windscreen shone with spots of rain, but there was no real threat of a down-pour.

Mr. Ingersoll skidded the car round a half-hidden rock then brought it to a standstill some twenty yards from the mouth of the Anchorite's Cave.

'Sandy and I will investigate,' he said, jumping out. 'The rest of you wait here and keep watch.'

'T-take care no one shoots you!'

'We'll be safe enough, Willic.'

The cave was high and wide at its entrance, with smooth walls which glistened with damp in the light of Mr. Ingersoll's torch. A tunnel with roughly cut steps disappeared upwards to the right.

THE ATOM CHASERS

'Anyone here?' shouted Sandy.

There was no answer.

Then they spotted a smaller cave at the back and hurried towards it. With a lift of his heart Sandy saw a bundle lying in a corner. It was the Major, trussed up like a turkey and gagged as well. As they knelt down to release him his eyes shone with stifled anger.

The gag came off, and he spluttered like a volcano about to erupt. At last he found words. 'That woman!' he roared. 'That woman who calls herself my cousin——'

Mr. Ingersoll soothed him. 'We know all about her, Major—thanks to Sandy and his friends.'

Thin rope was removed from his wrists and ankles. He sat nursing them, obviously in pain.

'Did they hurt you, sir?' asked Sandy.

'Not much—not much.' He rumbled again, and his red cheeks swelled. 'But if I get my hands on that tinker——'

'What happened?' put in Mr. Ingersoll.

'Bah! Ought to have my head examined! Old campaigner, too.' Suddenly he stopped and glared at his questioner. 'Look here, Ingersoll—who the deuce are you?'

'Secret Service.'

A slow smile spread on the laird's congested face. 'I was right, by George! Searched your room at the hotel last night, you know. Sorry about it, but patriotism before manners, eh?'

'Quite.'

'Found a paper in a drawer of your dressing-table

RESCUE PARTY

—details about Miss Cunningham. The real Miss Cunningham. That she was dead.'

Sandy remembered. 'So that's why you were "staggered a bit"?'

'Yes—couldn't understand it. This morning, Miss Cunningham asked me to go with her to the Anchorite's Cave. That confounded tinker appeared—knocked me on the head.'

'Miss Cunningham and the tinker,' said Mr. Ingersoll, 'are planning to blow up the dynamo at the atomic station--in fifteen minutes from now.'

'What! Why the blazes didn't you tell me!' The Major scrambled stiffly to his feet, obviously still in some pain but determined to overcome it.

'Legs feeling better?'

'Yes—circulation's back. But give me your arm, sir.'

'Right. We've got your car. It'll take us less than five minutes to get to the station.'

'Good enough!' He tottered out of the cave, supported by Mr. Ingersoll. 'That women—when I think of her, under my roof, eating my salt—and all the time she's a beastly spy!'

The Secret Service man again took charge of the wheel, while the Major and Sandy jammed in beside him. The old sports car screamed off, turning sharp right half a mile from the cliff.

'At this speed we should be there before five to,' said Sandy, his teeth jarring as they hit a pot-hole in the track.

THE ATOM CHASERS

Willie piped up. 'Wh-what happens if we catch them red-handed?'

'I'll tell you, boy!' The Major was growing stronger every minute and his voice more powerful. 'I'll strangle them—with my own hands!'

But Constable Grant still remembered his duty. 'If you please, sir,' he said, 'there will be no violence. Everything will be done proper, according to the law.'

'Tcha! You didn't spend a whole day trussed up in a cave! By George, that woman will be——'

His tirade was interrupted by a small, sharp explosion. The car swerved violently, and only a quick jerk at the wheel by Mr. Ingersoll prevented it skidding into the ditch. He brought it to a wobbling standstill.

'My goodness—a puncture!' groaned Constable Grant.

Mr. Ingersoll glanced at his watch. 'Ten to two and still a mile and a half to go. We'll never do it on our feet.'

But now it was the Major's turn to take command. 'Everybody out!' he ordered, himself setting the example in spite of his sore ankles. 'Spare tyre at the back. You, Ingersoll, open the boot.'

'Right.'

'Grant—the jack.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You and Sandy—operate beneath the car. Jock—unstrap the spare wheel.'

'Okay, sir.'

'Ingersoll—you and Willie, unscrew nuts on hub.'

RESCUE PARTY

'Very good, sir.'

'Gee, will we ever be in time?' panted Willie.

'Remains to be seen, boy. But hurry now-hurry!'

CHAPTER XVI

Willie's Big Moment

MAJOR MORRISON hadn't commanded a company of Ghurkas for nothing. He rattled out orders like a machine-gun, and in five minutes dead the spare wheel was on. The punctured one, along with the jack and other tools, was flung unceremoniously into the boot.

'Right—ready to go!' gasped Mr. Ingersoll.

'Excellent, by George! Now then—into the car everybody. This time I'll drive myself.' He got the engine going and let in the clutch, and with a breath-taking surge they set off again for the atomic station. 'We should still reach it in time,' he shouted, pressing harder on the accelerator. 'This is the life, eh? Tally-ho!'

The old car swerved and shuddered like a bucket in a stream. The cool night-breeze whipped past and stung their faces.

Constable Grant was moved to a chattering protest. 'For goodness' sake, sir—there's a speed limit on this road!'

The Major laughed. 'We're on special service now. No time for speed limits!'

The boys were enjoying themselves—even Willie, though his eyes were tightly shut. Sandy watched the

WILLIE'S BIG MOMENT

speedometer needle top sixty and gave a shout of sheer high spirits. Swaying and bumping on the back seat, Jock yelled: 'Gosh, this is great!'

Mr. Ingersoll consulted his watch. Three minutes to two. Then he looked up and saw in front the main entrance to the station—a strong wooden gate about eight feet high, with barbed wire on top. But no one appeared to be attending it.

'Ought to be guards,' he muttered.

'Maybe they're being changed,' suggested Constable Grant. 'This is the very time Miss Cunningham said she and Donald Sween would plant the bomb!'

Less than three hundred yards from the closed gate, Major Morrison had still not slackened speed.

'If you stopped and blew your horn,' suggested Mr. Ingersoll.

'Nonsense! Place may be blown up at any minute. I'm going to charge straight through.'

Sandy gulped, then shouted: 'Quite right, sir—on you go!'

'Hear that, Ingersoll! The spirit of "The Atom Chasers," eh?'

'But—but you'll be destroying Government property,' stuttered Constable Grant.

'The dynamo is Government property, too—and more valuable than a gate. Now then—into the valley of death, into the mouth of hell——'

The bonnet of the car crashed full tilt into the spars. They sprang out and flew around them. The boys ducked and shouted, 'Tally-ho!' Mr. Ingersoll and Constable Grant held on grimly and said their prayers.

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Then they were through, with no more damage than a splintered headlamp, and heading for the central square.

'Stop and blow, eh?' snarled the Major, picking a sliver of wood off the wheel and throwing it overboard. 'Where's Sir Wilfred's bedroom?'

'There,' pointed Mr. Ingersoll, humbly. 'Not far from the dynamo-shed.'

As the car whined to a stop on the tar macadam, with the Major shouting 'Whoa!' to it, half a dozen uniformed men came running towards them—obviously the guards. Then another man in a dressing-gown, exceedingly angry: Sir Wilfred Steele himself.

'What is the meaning of this outrage?' he demanded. 'I—' Then he broke off. 'Major Morrison!' he exclaimed.

The laird completely ignored him. 'Guards!' he roared, in a voice which made them jump to obey. "Surround the station! Let no one in or out!"

'What the dickens?' shouted Sir Wilfred, seeing his men scatter.

But Mr. Ingersoll put a hand on his arm. 'He's quite right, sir. Spies in the station. They mean to blow up the dynamo.'

'But look here——'

Major Morrison turned on him, white moustache puffing. 'Miss Cunningham and that tinker fellow—both spies. Villains, I tell you. That missing container—they plan to blow up your dynamo with it—put the station out of commission. Lucky if they haven't planted it already! Let's have a look—at once!'

WILLIE'S BIG MOMENT

Sir Wilfred gave in with a shrug of despair and led them towards the metal shed, Constable Grant and the boys panting in the rear. He opened the door and switched on the light. The dynamo wasn't running, but nothing seemed to have been tampered with.

Then in the silence they heard a soft, insistent ticking, and a cold chill ran up Sandy's spine.

'*Chiall beannachd mi!*' muttered Grant. 'What is it?'

Mr. Ingersoll climbed the guard-rail and looked into the black, shining machine. Willie caught the tail of Sandy's jacket and held tight.

Suddenly, the Secret Service man straightened up. 'Beneath the fly-wheel casing—I can't get my arm in far enough.'

Sandy said, quietly: 'What is it, sir?'

'The missing container. With an attachment like a detonator.'

'Gosh—a time-bomb!' breathed Jock.

Sir Wilfred wrung his hands. 'Ingersoll—can't you reach it?' he said.

'It's too far in. This opening's not wide enough to let my shoulders through.'

Sandy took a deep breath. 'Could I squeeze in, sir?'

'No. The only one who might manage it is Willie.'

They stared at him, small and insignificant in his shorts and waterproof jacket. But the idea of Willie taking a hand in the operation was so fantastic that no one took it seriously.

It was Sir Wilfred who put everyone's thoughts

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into words. 'We must get out of here! The thing may go off at any minute——'

Willie let go of Sandy's jacket and stepped forward. 'If there's no one else wee enough,' he said, in a tiny, quavering voice, 'I'll do it.'

They could hardly believe their ears. But there he was, climbing over the rails and looking up at Mr. Ingersoll.

'Where do I go in?' he asked.

The Secret Service man wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. Then he indicated a small opening in the metal cowling. 'Hurry, boy—hurry!'

Willie knelt down and squeezed into the aperture. The ticking seemed to get louder.

'By George,' muttered the laird, 'there's a hero for you! Scared to death—yet in he goes, like a soldier!'

Sandy and Jock watched their friend disappear. Their minds were numb. It was like a nightmare, and they wished they could waken up and discover it was all a dream. At any moment they expected a shattering explosion.

But suddenly Willie scrambled out again, clutching the home-made bomb. No one spoke. He handed the thing to Mr. Ingersoll, who quickly pulled out two red terminals. The current was broken, and the ticking stopped.

'He's done it!' exclaimed the Major, breaking a knife-edge silence. 'He's saved your station, Sir Wilfred—and your precious scientists as well!'

Mr. Ingersoll showed them the bomb. 'Electric battery—time mechanism—small atomic charge.

WILLIE'S BIG MOMENT

The whole station would have gone sky-high. Harmless now, though.'

Sir Wilfred nodded. 'They must have planted it just before you came. How can I thank you, Major Morrison——'

'Don't thank me! Thank Willie, sir!' The laird held out his hand. 'By George, boy—I'm proud of you!'

Willie swallowed. 'P-please, sir, I'm shaking like an aspirin leaf!'

But the Major was now in full spate. 'Modern youth, eh? Who said they were degenerate? Tell me that, Grant!'

'I—I never said it, sir. I——'

'Sandy and Jock, too—they'd have gone in as well.' Still roaring, he turned to glare at the Station Director. 'By George, I'm a proud man, Sir Wilfred! I, too, have the honour to belong to "The Atom Chasers"!'

'“The—er—"The Atom Chasers"?"'

'Yes. Patriots, sir—not snivelling, miserable scientists——'

One of the guards rushed into the dynamo shed. 'Two unidentified strangers, Sir Wilfred. Slipped out through our cordon and went off in a car.'

'What!'

'Only a minute ago. They must have been hiding inside the station. We saw them crawling out below the wire but couldn't overtake them in time.'

Mr. Ingersoll struck a fist into the palm of his other hand. 'Miss Cunningham and the tinker—trying to get away. It must be!'

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'Goodness,' cried Constable Grant, 'I must 'phone through to headquarters!'

But once again Major Morrison took charge. 'Right,' he said, "phone your headquarters, Grant. The boys and I will pursue the enemy in my car.'

He ran for the door, Sandy, Jock and Willie close behind.

Sir Wilfred called after him: 'What can *I* do Major?'

For a moment he stopped on the threshold. 'Keep your eyes on your blasted scientists!' he bellowed. 'Incompetent bunch of morons! Come on, boys!'

They reached the car. On their heels arrived Mr. Ingersoll. 'Don't leave me behind!' he said.

'Good man!' The Major jumped into the driving-seat, with Sandy and Willie beside him and Jock and Mr. Ingersoll at the back. 'The more the merrier.' He pressed the self-starter, then swung the car round and set it carcering in the direction of the main gate. 'Where's that other vehicle?' he demanded.

'Yonder,' pointed Sandy. 'A mile away down the road. You can just see its lights.'

'H'm. Must be my saloon—pinched by that woman!'

They crashed through the ruins of the gate and began the pursuit on the pitted moorland track. To the boys it was like the cinema—only much better, because it was real and they were actually taking part in the adventure. The chase promised to be a long one, but the Major knew the roads better than the spies, and he was confident that it could be brought to a successful conclusion.

WILLIE'S BIG MOMENT

Through the darkness they rattled, with the tail-lights of the car winking and swerving far in front. In a few minutes they reached the main road and turned left in the direction of the village.

CHAPTER XVII

The End of the Chase

AND IN the village, at almost the same time, Mrs. Campbell was facing her husband in their sitting-room at the Manse. 'Walter—we must do something! It's ten past two, and there's still no news of Sandy.'

'I know, my dear.' The minister tried to comfort her. 'But what *can* we do? Ever since I came back from the Presbytery meeting I've been trying to 'phone the Police Station, but there's no reply. Jock's people and Willie's people are in the same predicament.'

She sat down on an arm of his chair, fidgeting with a small handkerchief. 'What on earth can have happened?' she said.

'Major Morrison may have taken them out on one of his trailing expeditions and got lost.'

'I have a feeling it's something far more serious. Oh, if Sandy would only come back I'd never be cross with him again!'

'There, there.' He patted her arm. 'I'm sure there is a simple explanation. Constable Grant will find out—if we just have patience and give him time.'

'Poor Sandy!' she whispered, tearfully. 'Such a quiet boy and so well-mannered. I've often told him

THE END OF THE CHASE

he was rough and harum-scarum, but I didn't mean it.'

'Of course you didn't. They say ministers' sons are always the worst, but it's not really true about Sandy.'

'Jock and Willie are such nice companions, too. They'd never lead him into danger, would they?'

'No, no. And if the boys do happen to be with Major Morrison we can depend on it that he's looking after them. He's so solid and sensible.'

She wiped her eyes. 'Walter, I'm not so sure about that,' she said. 'Sometimes there's a wild expression in his face——'

The telephone rang. Mr. Campbell jumped up and lifted the receiver, while his wife stood close, clutching his arm.

'The Rev. Walter Campbell here . . . Constable Grant—'phoning from the atomic station! . . . Oh, that's good news at least . . . What's that you say—*spies*? And they're going after them in the Major's car! . . . I see—thank you for ringing. Good-bye.'

'Walter—what is it?'

'It—it's almost incredible, my dear! Two spies attempted to blow up the station. But Major Morrison and the boys saved the situation in the nick of time.'

'Good gracious!'

'The spies got away, but now Major Morrison and the boys—with Mr. Ingersoll—are in hot pursuit. Constable Grant said the two cars will probably be passing the Manse at any minute now.'

They ran to the window, pulled back the curtains

THE ATOM CHASERS

and raised the lower sash. In the still night air could be heard the scream of two engines approaching at speed. They waited. Presently, around the sharp corner leading into the village, a set of headlights came into view. Then, about four hundred yards behind, another set.

As they watched, their arms about each other, the leading car screeched past on the road below. It was a medium-sized saloon; but they were unable to identify its passengers.

A few seconds later came the open sports. In the light streaming down from the window they glimpsed Major Morrison crouched over the wheel, with the others waving and shouting him on.

'Oh, dear!' breathed Mrs. Campbell. 'I hope they don't have an accident!'

'It's all right,' replied her husband, with more assurance than he felt. 'The Major is an expert driver.'

He closed the window and drew the curtains. 'Now I must 'phone the Postmaster and Mr. Niven,' he said. 'About Jock and Willie.'

'Poor Sandy!' she sighed again. 'Such a sheltered life he's led—and now this! He must be terrified.'

Far from being terrified, Sandy was encouraging the Major to drive even faster. 'This is terrific!' he yelled. 'In another ten minutes we'll be right up behind them.'

They flashed through the village and skidded round the corner leading to the main Glasgow road. Momentarily, Willie's leg became entangled with the gear lever as he tried to steady himself; but

THE END OF THE CHASE

Major Morrison slapped his knee and he pulled it away just in time for the next gear change.

'Had you any suspicions at all, Major—about Miss Cunningham?' inquired Mr. Ingersoll.

'Not a suspicion. Wait till I get my tongue on her! Called herself an antiquarian, so that she could muck about near the station without being noticed.'

'For the same reason I called myself a bird-watcher. Only she didn't make a mistake—as I did about the Rough-Legged Buzzard!'

They came to a steep hill, and the sports car drew closer to its quarry.

'Where d'you think they're making for?' asked Sandy.

'Glasgow,' returned the laird, tersely.

'Gosh,' said Willie, 'will we have to go all the way to Glasgow after them?'

'I hope not! If Grant is worth his salt he'll have warned all police patrols by this time.'

Then the headlights of the car in front picked out the wide white ribbon of the Glasgow road. They also picked out a dark shadow blocking the junction.

'A car!' yelled Jock. 'A police car!'

'Easy, sir!' exclaimed Mr. Ingersoll. 'There's going to be a crash or I'm a Dutchman!'

Now things began to happen so quickly that the boys found it difficult to take them all in. The driver of the saloon—it turned out to be Donald Sween—spotted the danger too late. He tried to brake and swerve but instead crashed broadside on into the police car. Before he and Miss Cunningham could clamber out they were surrounded by police,

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and in the glare of headlights two pairs of handcuffs glinted.

Behind them the Major brought his sports car to an undignified crab-like halt. 'Come on!' he exclaimed to his passengers. 'I'm going to give that woman a piece of my mind. Then we'll take her and her beastly accomplice back to the Police Station in Dunglass—under arrest this time!'

Half an hour later the spies were in Constable Grant's office, facing an interrogation by Mr. Ingersoll. They looked drawn and tired; but there was no sign of a break in their spirit. Though it was clear they had now no chance of escaping, they refused to give the slightest information about themselves. Their real names and nationalities remained a mystery.

'Ach, you're hopeless!' said Constable Grant, finally. 'It's no good, Mr. Ingersoll—we might as well put them in the cells and have done.'

'Just one more question. You, Sween—or whatever your name is—did you drop from an aeroplane last Tuesday night?'

'No comment.'

Mr. Ingersoll sighed. 'Look here, I'll tell you how I've pieced this case together. Then you can tell me if I've gone wrong somewhere. First of all, the country you're working for decided that Britain was getting too much of a lead, as far as atomic power for industry is concerned, and that the leading research establishment, here in Dunglass, must be destroyed. You, Miss Cunningham—you were detailed to organise the job, and to this end you made enquiries

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about the parish, found that Major Morrison's cousin had died without his knowledge and stepped into her shoes. Am I right so far?"

'No comment,' said the woman.

'I'll go on. Miss Cunningham was supplied with a small radio transmitting set and an Aldis lamp, with which she could make signals to a foreign plane flying over the district at night. As a base of operations she chose at first Major Morrison's greenhouse. It had a glass roof, and if the radio failed she could signal through it with a lamp. The first night she was here the Major actually heard her transmitting a radio message and imagined it to be two people talking; and when he emptied his gun at a figure retreating across the lawn, he had no idea that the figure was Miss Cunningham—wearing slacks.'

'Very clever,' said Donald Sween. 'No wonder they made you a secret agent.'

'Sarcasm doesn't become you,' replied Mr. Ingersoll, calmly. 'But to continue. On the Monday night I was watching the atomic station and saw someone creeping out below the fence. I followed this person, not knowing it was Miss Cunningham, and not knowing that on my trail were "The Atom Chasers." Well, Miss Cunningham led us to Major Morrison's house, but then Sandy and Jock fell through the roof of the greenhouse and I had to beat a retreat. That accident also caused Miss Cunningham to transfer her transmitter and Aldis lamp to the Anchorite's Cave; but she happened to drop a spare valve on the way, which was picked up

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by a postman and provided "The Atom Chasers" with a valuable clue.'

Donald Sween was becoming less controlled. 'You're lying!' he snarled.

But the woman turned on him. 'Say nothing—I told you!' she ordered.

Mr. Ingersoll went on: 'That night Major Morrison and the boys saw you signalling from the cave, Miss Cunningham, telling the pilot that you wanted your accomplice dropped by parachute. He was an expert in explosives and disguised as a tinker. But you were disturbed in the cave by "The Atom Chasers," and though they were scared away by Constable Grant, you realised that they had probably seen the lights. You arranged for Donald Sween to tell the boys he had spent the night in the cave and for the remains of a tinker's fire to be found on the high ledge. You also told him to create confusion in their minds by warning them about me.'

As he paused, Constable Grant brought his big hand down on the table. 'You're right up to date, Mr. Ingersoll. I can see it in their faces!'

'By this time,' the Secret Service man continued, 'I felt that something queer was going on. I had been sent to Dunglass on the merest breath of suspicion—a garbled message from one of our agents—abroad—but now I was sure that the suspicion was justified. Sir Wilfred Steele knew what I was doing, and I could enter and leave the station whenever I wanted. The afternoon you came to see it, Miss Cunningham—along with the Major and the boys—I was looking for trouble, but you

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were too smart. You stole the container under my very nose, and I hadn't the faintest idea that you were responsible.

'From then on things began to happen quickly. I had been making inquiries about all strangers in Dunglass, and the C.I.D. suddenly came through with a remarkable piece of information. It showed that whoever Miss Cunningham might be, she wasn't the laird's cousin. Major Morrison himself found this out—when he searched my room at the hotel—and accused his guest of being an imposter. She denied it, of course, and said that if he'd come with her to the Anchorite's Cave she would prove that I was merely trying to divert suspicion from myself. There the Major was overpowered by you, Donald Sween. You meant to leave him there until the station was blown up and you had both escaped in the Major's saloon. Well, "The Atom Chasers" saw you signalling to the plane again—that the job would be completed that night—and the result, as I needn't emphasise, was most unfortunate for you. Now, have I made any mistakes?'

Sween glowered. 'We're not talking. She told you.'

'Oh, very well.' Mr. Ingersoll shrugged. 'But from the look in your eyes I think my reconstruction is correct. Take them away, Grant.'

CHAPTER XVIII

Postscript

A MEETING of 'The Atom Chasers' was held three nights later in the Manse toolshed. The boys got there early.

'Seems odd,' said Sandy, sitting down on his potato box. 'I mean, being here with no spies to discuss.'

Willie giggled. 'I'm quite pleased about that. I hate spies. Would you like a toffee?'

'Would we like a toffee!' mimicked Jock. 'Come on—how many have you got?'

'There's fourteen bits in the bag, but I don't want them divided up. Every now and then I'll just hand you one.'

Sandy laughed sardonically, flicking his torch on and off. 'Listen to him! The great man will just *hand* us one! Getting big ideas just because he helped to dismantle a bomb last Friday night!'

'Oh, gee—that's not true!'

'You're still two years younger than we are, remember. And if we didn't look after you at school the other boys would soon start bullying you again.'

'So hand over, my boy,' said Jock, grinning. 'Fourteen toffees—five each for Sandy and me, and four for you.'

The argument was about to develop further when

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suddenly a special knock sounded on the door—two short, three long, two short. It was the Major, burdened by three large parcels.

He greeted them with affability and sat down in the empty barrow. 'What's the programme for tonight,' he inquired.

'Nothing much, sir,' answered Sandy. 'Just to decide the future of "The Atom Chasers".'

'I see.'

Willie rustled the paper bag in his hand. 'Would you like a sweetie, sir?'

'M'm—very good of you to suggest it, boy. But look here, before we get down to business I have brought some comforts for the troops.'

The boys eyed the parcels with sudden interest. But they were too polite to make any comment.

'Here's the first one—for Sandy, our company commander. Open it up, boy.'

Sandy hurried to tear off the paper. Then he sat staring at a beautiful miniature rifle, its barrel glinting in the torchlight. 'Gosh,' he exclaimed, 'a point two-two!'

'Give you some fun, potting at jam-jars,' chuckled the Major, cutting short his fervent thanks. 'Hope your father won't object—being a parson, eh?'

'No fear, sir. He used to be a crack shot in the Army. Golly, this is great!'

Then it was Jock's turn. As the brown paper fell to the earthen floor his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

'A constructional set!' he managed to blurt out. 'Number 10—the biggest size there is—with an

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electric motor and cog-wheels and goodness knows what!’

‘Like it?’ said the Major.

‘Like it! Gosh, thank you, sir!’

‘Now, Willie—this is for you. Open it and let’s hear what you think.’

Willie’s hands were shaking as he undid the wrappings. In fact, they shook so much that Sandy and Jock had to lend assistance. Eventually, however, his present was revealed; but as the others turned to see his expression they discovered that his eyes were tightly shut.

‘I—I can’t look!’ he squeaked.

‘Come on, boy!’ grinned the Major. ‘Face up to it, as you faced up to the bomb.’

Slowly Willie opened his eyes. Then he gasped: ‘Oh, gee—a great big book!’

‘Go on,’ said Sandy, ‘read the title: *British Birds and Their Haunts, With Two Hundred Prints in Colour*. And look at the price—seven pounds ten!’

‘P-please, sir!’ stammered Willie.

‘Yes, boy?’

‘Th-thank you, sir. It—it’s the best present anybody ever got!’

The Major smiled and puffed out his moustache. ‘Glad you like it. When we’ve finished here I vote we all go down to the hotel and show the picture of the Rough-Legged Buzzard to Mr. Ingersoll! He’s leaving tomorrow.’

This was agreed on, though Willie remarked that he wouldn’t let anybody *touch* his book except himself, in case the pages got dirty.

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'Very well,' said Major Morrison. 'Now, let's get on with the rest of the meeting.'

Sandy put their problem. 'We—er—we were just wondering if we should go on. With "The Atom Chasers", I mean.'

'Don't see why not,' replied the laird. 'May be more spies yet. After a war the army still keeps in training. Tell you what. Appoint me training officer. Old hand, you know. We'll practise following trails, reading tracks, interpreting natural phenomena—that kind of stuff.'

'The very thing, sir,' agreed Sandy, with enthusiasm. 'Then if more spies do come we'll be ready for them.'

'Exactly. Hope you'll come often to my house. Lonely a bit nowadays.'

They promised to come whenever he liked, and the meeting was about to adjourn to visit Mr. Ingersoll when the door shook under a heavy knock.

'Who's in there?' came an authoritative Highland voice. 'Come out, whoever you are—in the name of the law!'

With a gesture of disgust Major Morrison got up and opened the door. He glared out at their visitor. 'What the dickens are you up to now?' he roared.

Constable Grant blinked in surprise. 'Mercy upon us! You again, sir. I thought it was thieves—or tramps!'

'Once and for all,' said the Major, 'get it into your thick head that this toolshed is our headquarters. The headquarters of "The Atom Chasers".'

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'I—I'll remember.' The policeman struggled with his conscience. 'But a man of your position, sir—I mean, why should you be acting like a child—sitting in a toolshed——'

'Why shouldn't I be sitting in a toolshed? It's a free country, isn't it?'

'Of course, sir. Of course.'

'And what's more, Grant. If it *wasn't* a free country—if there wasn't plenty of room in it for people like "The Atom Chasers"—your precious atomic station would have been blown sky high by this time!'

'Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir.'

'So you should be! But now that you are here, you can escort us with your lantern to the hotel.'

'Very well, sir. The boys, too?'

'Certainly. Where would *you* be without them? Tell me that!'

Grant sighed as he led the way out through the dark garden.

'Good old Major!' grinned Sandy, and Jock and Willie echoed his sentiments.

